Suryamani Tripathy



SELECTED STORIES

Translated by

Basant Kumar Tripathy



Suryamani Tripathy was born in Dovabil village of Jajpur district in 1942. After his graduation from N.C. College, Jajpur, he joined the Police Service and took retirement as Superintendent of Police in 2000. His publications include five volumes of stories, three anthologies of poems, a book of essays, a novel, three books of plays and three detective novels. He has acted in several plays and films. At present he is a TV panellist taking part in discussions on current topics.

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To

Sri Prafulla Chandra Samal

A teacher cannot be measured by the colour of his skin, or by his creed and religion, or by his clothes and jewels, but by his power to influence the lives of his pupils.

Suryamani

To my Readers

Earlier, my hobbies included writing poetry and acting in plays and movie; never had it occurred to me that I was cut out for story writing. It was somewhat accidental when one of my fellow actors, while shooting a film, discovered the potentiality of a story-teller in me. This rare discovery induced me to write the first story. To my surprise, it won the first prize in a story competition. Since then, for over three decades now, I have been writing stories, trying to find out the meaning of life that still hides at a place unknown to me.

As a police officer, I have the first-hand experience of the lives of the subalterns who are constantly subject

to exploitation, oppression, deprivation and social injustice. Their grief sickens me to tears. Thoughts keep buzzing around me like angry insects. I feel blue when I see the ill-fated women with misty eyes, the starving children with distended bellies, the unfed villagers scraping a living from the soil, the opera actors whose dreams are fading away and a young girl gambling away her virginity for twenty rupees to feed a father having lost his eyesight in an accident and a mother having her legs amputated. All this and many more make a tiny tear drop from the corner of my eye.

The world of my stories is constituted by two distinct groups of people : those whose lives run on well-oiled wheels and those who live in poverty and squalor – the centre and the margin. The margin clambers the steep path to touch the centre, but the centre does not cascade down. The disharmony between these two classes evokes pity, which is the subject of my stories. It has never been my concern whether my stories will be as sour as a lemon or as sweet as cookies, but to

make my readers aware of what is going on around them, in a word, to appeal to their conscience.

I cannot deny myself the pleasure of thanking my wife, Manorama, sons Bapu (Muna) and Kunu, daughter Mama, Son-in-law Jiban and daughters-in-law Lita and Chiku for their immense love and co-operation without which the book would have never seen the light of day. I also thank my readers for their appreciation of my stories which are of great value.

Suryamani Tripathy

The Lungi-clad Emperor

That day the village of Atarapur was thronged with people. Since the evening, like an army of ants, crowds of men, women and children from the neighbouring villages had been heading towards the shrine of the village deity. They were in a tearing hurry; if late, there would be hardly any seats left for them. In that case, they would miss the rare opportunity of enjoying the brilliant performance of the most reputed opera party for the night. Before the evening lamps were lit, they had finished their meals in a hurry, and, putting on their best clothes that they had kept carefully in cane boxes, they had

started walking, nay, galloping. To make the Makara festival a great success, the Gananatya opera party had been staging plays for the last two nights, "Tofan Daku", followed by "The killing of Gayasura". Those who saw them had their eyebrows raised. It was true, never before had the people of the area seen such performances. It was but for the efforts of the enthusiastic young men of the village that it could become possible. How could anyone afford to miss the chance?

To succeed in persuading such a famous opera party to perform in a remote village such as Atarapur, the young men of the village had left no stone unturned. Their month-long exercise included holding meetings and motivating the villagers through powerful speeches to accept new ideas, which was not at all easy. The problem was that the village administration, until then, was in the hands of the men of olden times, who clung to old beliefs and were unwilling to embrace anything new. Look at the people of Amathapur, a village with a few houses and a handful of inhabitants. Nevertheless, they were able to stage opera shows for two nights during the recent Kartikeswar puja. It could be possible as they

were united and had a progressive outlook. People in large numbers gathered in their village, as small as a basket, watched the show all night and went back, full of praises for the villagers. But, mark their arrogance ! The enthusiastic young men of Atarapur had also gone there, putting on bell-bottoms, cigarettes between their lips, waving handkerchiefs and riding Raleigh bicycles. When they occupied their seats, a man of Amathapur, working in Cuttack, asked them to vacate the seats reserved for women. Are your women so dignified? You may not allow others, but how dare you refuse the patriotic young men of Atarapur?

In spite of humiliation, they managed to witness the play that night. But the people of Amathapur were so bragging that on the plea of a duet performance, they made a caricature of the village of Atarapur by mocking at the dress and the habit of using perfume of its young men, which was not acceptable. The young men had to consume the insult silently for fear of displeasing the elderly persons of their village. But enough was enough. It was their good luck that they could get wind of the conspiracy of the old men to foil their attempt to hold opera shows

on the occasion of the Makara festival. For the sake of their self-respect, they took over the charges of the village into their own hands. Henceforward, they would decide how to celebrate the Makara festival and arrange the Asthaprahari and community feasts. "Let's see who stops us !" they said, "Look at Saraba's temerity ! Since he is doing some job in Cuttack, that *sala* doesn't care anyone. We told him politely, 'Sarbeswar babu ! You're well-educated; you've travelled to many places abroad. Social works such as festivals, feasts and *kirtan* are the lifeline of the village. Since you're in job with a handsome income, contribute at least two hundred rupees to the festival fund.' That *sala* replied, 'I won't give even a paisa, let alone two hundred rupees.' And what was the consequence ! The paddy from one acre of his land vanished overnight ! Let the *sala* do whatever he likes". Following him, Netibou, Hari Jena and Padan Das were playing hide-and-seek with them. To realise the amount towards their subscription, their goats, utensils and stone-steps were seized. Through constructive programmes, they were able to instil in the villagers the spirit of love towards the nation. Finally, they

succeeded in bringing the best opera party to their village, which attracted a record turnout. It had silenced their critics of Amathapur forever and brought glory to their village.

Kalpataru Baliarsingha was the star of the show. Last year, he was in the Piteipur opera party which made a booming business because of his excellent performance. But when his request for a marginal hike in salary was turned down by the owner, he left it. Agadhu Charan, the Manager of the Gananatya opera party, was waiting for this opportunity; he hired him without delay with an increase in his salary. The news that Kalpataru would appear as "Danikarna" on the stage that night had impelled the people to make a beeline for the shrine of the village deity of Atarapur.

Hailed from the Ahiyas *pragana* of Jajpur, Kalpataru was a dishy young man of thirty. His schooling remained incomplete as his father, the only breadwinner of his family, died of a sudden attack of cholera. Now Kalpataru had to bear the burden of his widowed mother, his ailing grandmother of seventy, four sisters and five brothers. Poverty forced him to knock at the doors of

many people for help. To arrange a square meal a day, his mother and brothers had to serve in the houses of the well-to-do people of the village, tending cows and cleaning cow-sheds. Even then, they had to go without food most of the times. His grandmother's health was deteriorating. His brothers and sisters were suffering from the pangs of hunger. Deciding to mitigate their suffering, he left home and took shelter in the opera party. Climbing step after step, Kalapa of the Ahiyas *pragana* acquired the dignity of being addressed as Kalpataru babu. In course of time, he married and became a father. But he had no relief from poverty in spite of working hard.

That Kalpataru, with a rural background, would appear as Karna that night; he would dispense largesse to the poor and the needy; he would fulfil their wishes without hesitation or remorse. While giving away wealth and riches to those who had none, his eyes would swim with tears. It did not matter whether it was acting or real. The very act of helping someone in need filled him with delight. Holding back the feeling of his bleeding heart, he would step onto the stage as Karna, the Benevolent One.

It was evening when his younger brother came from the village to meet him. He informed that his mother was ill and that they had hardly any money to buy medicine for her. He added that his three-year-old youngest son was suffering from malaria and going on without treatment. Whatever money they had borrowed, which was like a straw in a camel's mouth, had already been spent. Both of them were struggling for life in the swampy countryside house. Kalpataru was shocked to hear it. The pictures of the gloomy faces of his mother and son flashed through his mind. Tears began to stream from his eyes. He told his brother to have patience. He thought he would ask Agadhu Charan for some money and give it to his brother. But the Manager never liked to give money, nor permission to go on leave to his employees. What would he do? Since he had sold himself to the Manager for a year, signing an agreement, he had no choice. Still he would try to persuade him. If he agreed, so far so good, and, if not, he would consider it a strange quirk of fate.

Kalpataru decided to keep patience. He realised that the poor were destined to

suffer. It was as if God had created all the sorrows only for the poor. He felt like breaking down. He thought : How long would he continue to suffer? Was there no end to it? He felt it was too much for him to take in. Heaving a deep sigh, he left the camp and walked along absent-mindedly until he reached the cremation ground on the river bank. There was no one about, except jackals and dogs moving around. He sat under a tree. The suffering of his mother and son haunted him again and again. Tired in body and mind, he felt drowsy and dopey, and fell asleep there.

He had a dream : Taking some money from the Manager and his permission to leave, he went to his village. He found his son lying on the death-bed, wailing. He took him into his lap. He had a single hiccup, and then, he passed away. He carried him to the cremation ground where a ferocious-looking man of six feet asked for fees. Kalpataru remembered playing the role of Harischandra in a play staged by the Piteipur opera party last year. After being sold to a *chandal,* he did the job of an undertaker. Saibya came to the cremation ground with Rohitaswa, who had died from

snake-bite. Harischandra refused to cremate her son unless she paid the fees. Having no money with her, she began to weep. Recognising her, Harischandra broke down in grief. He prepared a pyre for his dead son to be cremated. Kalpataru thought the present undertaker was an actor like him. He persuaded him not to pretend and allow him to cremate his son. But the undertaker was unbending; he refused to allow him unless he paid the fees. Puzzled, Kalpataru tried to locate to which opera party he belonged. Sure that he must be an actor, he started digging the ground when, suddenly, the undertaker pounced on him and snatched the spade from his hand. Kalpataru lost his cool; he flared up and slapped him on his cheek. The undertaker, mad with anger, hit him on his head with a stick, that sent him sprawling to the ground.

Jolted awake, he discovered himself under a banyan tree on the river bank near the village of Atarapur. He was in a disturbed state of mind, caused by the dream he had. His face was speckled with beads of sweat even in the winter night. He stood up.

As the time for the show drew near, everyone remembered Kalpataru who was

not to be seen. Soon the news of Kalpataru missing reached Agadhu Charan who had just returned from Cuttack. Disgusted and worried, he tried to guess the reasons for his absence. Did he leave for the village as his mother and son were ill? Why, then, his brother was still there? No, he must be somewhere there. If so, why wasn't he getting ready for the show? All hell broke loose when the young men of Atarapur village came to know about it. Someone shouted, "Beat them !", another cried out, "Let's burn down their camp." One of them proposed to set their costume on fire while someone else suggested it to be taken to the village store-house. At the time a young man, seemingly a leader, instructed them, "The hero might have fallen asleep somewhere. All of you go and find him out. We'll see to the rest later." A search for the hero started; they combed the whole village – the Bhagavata cottage, the school, the mango grove and the temple of Lord Mahadev. Those who had gone in the direction of the cremation ground heard a loud cry coming from near the banyan tree. They cringed in fear when they saw someone coming towards them in the dark.

Was he a man or a ghost ? While they were thinking of running away, Kalpataru came out. Suddenly a sense of victory seized them. They welcomed him and told him all that had happened during his absence. One of them ran to the camp to inform the Manager about it.

It was time for the play to begin. Kalpataru entered the green room, hot and flustered. Not minding the Manager babu's frown, he made himself up. While collecting his costume, he did not find his underwear, the only one he had. Outside, the noise of the spectators was deafening. What would he do?

Finding no other alternative, he managed with the lungi he had put on, its lower part passing between his legs and tucked at the back. Then he put on the embroidered royal costume. He wore a necklace of artificial pearls, arm-bands, earrings and a turban. Now he was unmistakably Karna, the Benevolent One.

The play started; scene after scene went on. The spectators cheered and clapped to see Kalpataru on the stage.

There was a scene in which a brahmin would ask Karna to pledge three

times to give him what he wanted. Karna, the King of Anga, alias Kalpataru alias Kalapa of the Ahiyas *pragana* appeared on the stage. Hearing the brahmin's words, he wondered why he wanted him to do so when he did not let anyone return empty-handed. While he was stepping forward and backward he felt the lungi tightening around his thighs. Pretending to be acting, he loosened it a little to make himself comfortable. The man, who, standing on the stage, was giving away wealth and riches and lakhs of cows to the poor in front of hundreds of spectators, did not have an underwear because of poverty ! When the brahmin threatened him to go back unless he vowed, Karna alias Kalpataru did what he said. With a smile, the brahmin asked for the flesh of his son, Brusaketu. He demanded that the king and the queen would kill him with their own hands and cook his flesh to feed him. At this Karna began to tremble; the earth rocked beneath his feet. His head reeled. The sight of his dilapidated house in the countryside flashed before his eyes. He could see Muna, his son, wracking in pain, and telling him, "Father ! Snoop me up ! I'll stay with you. Don't go away, leaving me."

Kalpataru lost control over himself; he fell down like a tree with a thud. The brahmin's speech brought back his consciousness. He told his wife, Padma about it. Banging her head, she cried her eyes out. But the queen's face seemed to him like that of the wife, which made him absent-minded. But the brahmin's dialogue reminded him of his duty in hand. He told Brusaketu all about it. Hearing his father's words, a smile rippled on his lips, which, to Kalpataru, appeared as his son's smile.

A sword in his hand, he stood with Padma with Brusaketu before them. He felt as if someone, taking advantage of his poverty, was asking him and his wife to kill their son, and they were not able to protest. He was looking at his son with tearful eyes. He could hear the whisper of Muna's invisible lips, "Father ! Mother ! Mince my flesh and fry it. That brahmin would never spare me. Don't weep. What if I die, if it helps my grandma get a drop of medicine and others live happily? I can't see you suffer endlessly." He let out a wild cry. He raised the sword and struck it at his son's neck, Padma helping him. While doing it, one of the pins used to fasten his costume got stuck

to his back, making it bleed. He was unable to pull it out before hundreds of prying eyes. Among the din and bustle of a boisterous crowd, the play came to an end.

Kalpataru returned to the green room. He was feeling tired and groggy. Just then, a man from his village arrived there to inform him about the death of his dearest son. Before he could utter a word, he slumped down onto the floor, unconscious. Those present there rushed to him. When they took off his costume, they discovered an emperor clad in a lungi, made in Khordha.

Rain Everywhere

For a month the area had been resounding with the news that the sahib would come. From badababu (Officer-in-charge of the local Police Station) to the lowest-grade employees, none had a moment of respite. Everyone was awfully busy as only fifteen days were left for the sahib to arrive. Karuna Nahak predicted that there would be a widespread rainfall for seven days and seven nights; the crop-fields would be submerged by water. All this would happen after a fortnight. There had been no rain until then; the sowing had not yet started. The heavy downpour would be followed by a massive flood. The words of the *Malika* that "Water-lilies will bloom on mountains" was going

to be true. Badababu heard about the sahib's tour programme while he had been to the headquarters. Returning, he sent for Karuna Nahak who made a detailed analysis of the weather forecast. He was so pleased that he offered Karuna a coin of four annas for the valuable information. He would have been all the more happy had the sahib decided to come in the second fortnight of the month; his visit would have been automatically cancelled due to rain. He muttered, "A shower of rain was enough to fill the drains and gutters around the Police Station. How will the sahib's jeep ply when all the roads are blocked by flood water? Alas ! He chose the first fortnight for his visit ! Did Karuna Nahak, the scoundrel, inform the sahib about the weather condition? Well ! I'll teach him a lesson."

A lot of works in the office were pending; they ought to be finished before the sahib dropped in. But badababu was too busy to pay attention to it. It was a rural area, and he had to collect a number of things to make the sahib's stay comfortable. One thing wanting and all his labour would be in vain. If he could please the sahib by any means, all other weak points would be easily

ignored. Would the *Mahabharata* be defiled if the unfinished works were settled after the sahib's visit? He was running from one place to another, busy collecting things such as large-sized prawns, *Rohi* fish, chicken, *Basumati* rice, *Patakapura* bananas, eggs, green coconuts, minnows, brinjals, pomegranate juice etc. His name was not considered for promotion last year because, in spite of having everything, there was no pomegranate juice for the sahib. The requirements for the night could be fetched from the town. The best quality of ghee and milk were badly needed. Would the sahib drink the coffee made from watery milk? Would the rice smell nice without freshly extracted ghee ?

Badababu was collecting the necessities from the nearby villages through his staff. Accusing Gouranga Sahu of his son's suicide by poison, eventhough it had happened five years ago, he ordered him to supply thirty rosgullas towards the sahib's refreshment. No one grumbled to contribute whatever they were asked for, considering it to be the sahib's work. He who defied the order, they thought, would be conveyed to hell.

As the day of the sahib's arrival approached, the compound of the Police Station as well as the rooms were cleaned down. The fly-leaves and documents of the office were dusted down. The room where the sahib was to stay was given a pleasant smell by burning *jhuna* every evening. The store-house was filled to capacity with things such as mangoes, jackfruits, sunned rice, cow-ghee, coconuts, pineapples, pulses, biscuits, cashew, chickens, eggs etc. Still badababu was shouting at others to fetch more. Learning that the local sarpanch was not reliable, he had engaged three other sarpanches to arrange fish. It was all set. Michhu nana of the other village knew how to cook for the sahib. He had also been hired.

Next morning the sahib would arrive straight from the headquarters. Badababu had no sleep the previous night. He was busy making documents ready for inspection. He supervised everything himself-from making the fireplace to checking the sahib's bed to ensure that there were no bedbugs in it. The sahib was whimsical in nature. Wherever he sat, he would take note of everything around him, inquiring about their cost and other details. Suppose, a small carpet was

borrowed from a zamindar for the sahib's use. He would ask its date of manufacture, who bought it for how much and from where, how it had been used so far, whether it was available in different sizes, and if so, what was their price. If you said it was borrowed, he would be displeased. If you said it was yours, he would ask you to order another for him. If you quote a high price, he would count you among the bribe-takers. So, badababu had to check each article before he returned home.

The sahib was due to reach at eight in the morning. Badababu, with his staff, was waiting to receive him. Hour after hour passed; it became ten o'clock, but the sahib was not to be seen. Badababu was in a fix. In case he did not turn up, it would not be possible to collect those things again. He would, of course, use the bottle of scotch himself and carry the goods home, which would cater to homely needs for at least six months. That's why people used to call him a man with four eyes. But his wife would not agree to it. When badababu returned from his tour of the countryside with a bag of *mung*, she would frown at him and say, "Oh, is this all? Couldn't you bring more?"

While he was lost in these thoughts, the man on watch at the entrance of the village came running to inform him that he had sighted a jeep down the lane of the next village. Badababu alerted everyone to be in position. After sometime, the sahib arrived.

Badababu received him with great respect and offered him his chair to sit. His face was tanned with the hot sun. He was offered coconut water to drink. The used coconut shells were left to roll inside the compound here and there.

The inspection started. Finding many works incomplete, the sahib flew into a fury. He launched a stream of abuse at badababu, sometimes like the clapping of thunder, sometimes like a torrent of rain. The verification of documents went on till one o' clock. Then the sahib left for lunch. The lunch time was an opportunity for badababu to mollify the sahib. He was running to and fro between the kitchen and the sahib's lunch table. After lunch, the sahib seemed to be in a happy mood.

After having a snooze, the sahib awoke. He told badababu, "Now it is time to leave. Bring me the inspection sheet. You're an experienced officer; everything

must be right." Badababu expressed his gratitude with a blush. Then, he loaded the sahib's jeep with the articles he had collected before. The driver was keeping them in order at the rear of the jeep, which took half an hour to complete. Looking at the articles, the sahib smiled and left for the headquarters cheerfully.

Eight days before Karuna Nahak's prediction and one hour after the sahib left, it started raining heavily. The rain slashed too hard for the driver to drive the jeep. The battering of rain soaked the sahib, the driver and the articles inside. After an hour, when the rain subsided, the driver tried to start the vehicle, but it was of no avail. At last, he took the help of the passers-by, returning from the *haat*, who pushed the jeep from behind to make it start. After a few minutes' drive along the embankment of the river, the wheels slipped and the jeep fell upended down on the ground under. The sahib and the driver had minor injury, but the articles sent by badababu were scattered in the mud.

Sitting in the office, badababu was deep in thought : How would it have been if it had rained a day earlier? The articles would have gone to his family to be used for

four months. Secondly, he would not have to face so much botheration.

Next morning, the sahib was preparing the inspection report at the headquarters. He was in a rough mood. He thought badababu had not given those things out of love. That's why such disaster took place. There was no sign of rain; how could it start pouring down all of a sudden? No, he must not be forgiven. He must be mean and faithless. An explanation must be called for immediately.

Receiving the inspection note after two days, badababu felt as if his limbs were paralysed. There was no chance of promotion for the next year. He had arranged everything, but the rain washed away his future. All this must be the handiwork of Karuna Nahak. He had put him in deep trouble by bringing rain. Might be because, in exchange for a *Rohi* fish, he had exonerated the man who had stolen packets of *bidi* from his shop.

Wax and Wane

The dark fortnight

Shanta looked at herself in the broken mirror before she stepped out of her house and got into a rickshaw.

Like a vulture speeding towards the cremation ground to swoop on a carcass, Pantulu's rickshaw raced to the rear gate of the Patitapaban hotel. As it reached the Priya cinema hall through a heavy traffic, Pantulu told her, "You must pay the arrear today, I warn you !" Shanta was silent.

"Don't you hear me?" Pantulu asked in a hoarse voice.

"Yes, I do", she replied.

Shanta got down from the rickshaw and walked into the hotel. She was about to

pass the kitchen when Ramulu, the hotel boy working there for a long time, said with a smile, "Number three." Her head downcast, she proceeded on her way, saying to herself God only knew what was written in her fate that night.

No sooner did she touch the door of Room Three, than it opened. She shook in fear to see a dark-complexioned man, looking like a demon, lying on the bed with his face down. The air inside was filled with the smell of country liquor with which she was not unfamiliar. But, this time it was so strong that it made her retch. She was thinking what to do when the man turned his face towards her. Suddenly his eyes fell on her. With a smile, he got up slowly, and pulling her hand, took her to bed and removed her clothes.

Previously she used to resist, but the consequence was bitter. Either her saree got torn or she sustained cuts and bruises on her body. Moreover, she was paid less than what she had expected. That brute was devouring her warm flesh with joy. She was silent, but she hated the way she was being treated. She wished to throttle the man, but that would make her parents starve to death.

While in the process of fulfilling his sensual desires, her thoughts turned to her past life, steeped in her memory.

The only child of her parents, she was born into a poor family. Nevertheless, there was no lack of parental love and care. Her father, a rickshawpuller by profession, used to buy a new dress for her on each festival day. He also got her admitted to a school. When she was ten, a great misfortune befell her family. One winter evening after her school, she was enjoying her meal with her friends when the news came that her father was run over by a vehicle on the street. She and her mother ran to the spot in panic where there was a crowd already. She was dumbstruck to see the accident site; her father was lying on the street, wincing in pain. His head was bleeding profusely. She broke down in grief, her eyes awash with emotion. Some of the onlookers took him to the hospital where he regained his consciousness after being treated for two days. His life was saved, but he lost his eyesight forever. Blind and helpless, he was now sobbing all the time, sitting on the verandah of his house.

After the incident, her mother

worked in the houses of others, washing dishes and clothes. With her little income, they managed themselves for some days. Misfortune never comes alone. One day her mother broke her legs while climbing down the staircase in her employer's house. Before Shanta could express her grief, her mother's legs had been amputated already. Now the burden of the family fell on her. The employer was a kind man; he hired Shanta in her mother's place and bore the expenses of the family. But how long? She found it difficult to feed three mouths with her limited income.

To support her blind father and lame mother, she stepped into that hotel as a dishwasher. One day, when she was about to leave, the Manager called her to his room. He asked her many questions, which she replied in yes or no. He made her sit on his bed, and, before she could make out anything, he suddenly got up and shut the door from inside. It was the first time in her life she gambled away her virginity for twenty rupees. From that day she shuddered with fear when she saw the Manager. But she dared not risk her job. Reminded of her parents' predicament, she had no regret to sacrifice all that she had.

After Manager babu, many others came in her life to satisfy their lust by paying her handsomely. That night, too, she was the victim to another man who was no different from others.

That inebriated beast attempted to ravish her for the second time. Her feeble protest irked him. He roared out, "I earn money by the sweat of my labour, by driving. I've come here to enjoy myself, not to crown you with gifts !" She knew all too well, if she did not obey him, he would kick her out of the room without a penny. Therefore, she surrendered herself to him silently. Her hatred for him was scattered in her like gunpowder, but she could not make them into a bomb as she did not want to let down her parents.

The bright fortnight

On the other side of the plywood wall that separated Room Three from another, a young man and a young woman, seemingly from an affluent background, were chortling with delight. When Prados brought Snigdha there, mentioning her as his sister in the hotel register, he felt a bit embarrassed. But it was neutralised by

Snigdha's amorous advances, soon after they perched in the room. Having Prados with her, she did not want to waste time. Her seductive dress, look and dry lips were enough to force Prados to attend to her needs. Provoked by her lustful postures, Prados lost control over himself and jumped onto the bed. With no clothes on them, they drowned themselves in the mirth of love.

"How handsome you're, Prados !" Snigdha's voice fluttered as she said it. Putting his mouth against her ears, he replied, "And what about you? Very ugly, eh?" It was followed by peels of laughter and an exchange of kisses, expressing the exuberance of their love.

The hotel boy placed a bottle of foreign liquor before them. Both of them exhausted the whole content, and, inebriated, they went on babbling. Prados was pouring praises on her for her extraordinary skill to dupe everyone – from her mother to the hotelier. Then, they repeated the act of love once again.

How long had he to wait for Snigdha's sweet smile and passionate words! On some pretext or the other, he went to

Snigdha's house to seduce her. He tried to impress her every moment, offering himself to help her. But she did not approve of it. At that time she was engaged to Jayanta, one of his classmates. She used to spend hours with him, watching movies or gossiping. But, now, Jayanta had left her, and she had found an emotional substitute in Prados. He would try his best not to miss her in future. He would not allow anyone to trespass on the territory of their relationship. Prados seemed totally absorbed in thought.

"What are you thinking?" Snigdha asked.

"It's nothing !" he replied.

Snigdha asked in a soft voice, "Won't you tell me what it is? Don't you know how much I love you? If there is anyone I love, it's you. For my sake, don't hide it from me. In this great moment of our union, we should bare our minds as we bare our bodies before each other. Now tell me Prados, what it is."

Prados was too enchanted by her to recollect how she had ditched Jayanta, abandoning him on the roadside in a jungle, infested with wild beasts. He said enthusiastically, "I love you, too, Snigdha ! I

love you more than my life. Give me word, you'll be mine forever."

Snigdha consented with a smile on her lips, on which Prados planted a number of kisses.

Suddenly Snigdha heard the voice of the man from Room Three. He was scolding his woman as harshly as he could. She thought perhaps the woman was unwilling to submit to him. But she was distracted by Prados' deep embrace that led them to sleep together. Next morning, on waking up, she heard the sound of the door of the other room opening. Perhaps the woman was leaving the room. She changed into her nightgown in a hurry, and, with her toothbrush and a tube of toothpaste in her hands, she scurried off to see who she was. At that time the woman she was looking for was taking a turn at the end of the verandah, adjacent to the bathroom. She did not know why she was so curious about her. She quickened her pace. After a while, she reached near the kitchen. She saw her in the kitchen washing a pile of dishes hurriedly. She was busy with her work; there was no sign of exertion or sleeplessness on her face.

Snigdha's eyes were locked on

Shanta. She was lost in thought. The woman perhaps, for her survival, was forced to offer her body to a stranger.

But why did she...?

The Hollow Man

Khelo Mian said, "Kela nana ! Please don't say no to me, I request you. I'm not going away anywhere. I'll repay your debt as soon as the harvest is done. I've sown *Narasimha* paddy in my field. I'll bring ripe palms for your children. I'll return you one-fourths more over and above what I borrow. I request you, don't disappoint me. My children are unfed. Lend me ten *gaunis* of paddy. It is the month of Aswina when food grains are scarce. Should my children go without food as long as you're here? I request..." Saying so, he advanced towards Kela nana to hold his hand and beg for paddy, his eyes filled with expectation. Kelu Satapathy retraced his steps, fearing that he

might touch him. To console him, he said, "Sit down ! Why do you worry? I've not taken bath, so I can't enter my granary now. Go home and come back in the afternoon. Let me check the stock first. If there is enough, I'll give you three or four *gaunis*. Now you may go." Khelo was happy, but he was worried about the quantity of paddy he mentioned. He protested, "No, nana ! Don't do that. Your land and my land border on each other. I assure you I'll never be a defaulter. I'll return every grain of yours. If I don't, you may grab all the produce from my land. If you give me less, whom shall I go to have the rest? Who'll hear my prayer? Don't disappoint me, nana !" Khelo stretched his hand towards Kela nana again. Satapathy was scared, as if he was confronted by a ghost. He spoke out, "Well ! Wait a while. Have patience. I'll give you as much as you want. Now let me go." Khelo Mian stood up, exposing his tobacco-stained teeth, saliva slithering through the gaps between them. Wiping it with his left hand, he said gratefully, "Let me have a look at the fields, and then, come back. By that time, I hope, you would have finished the puja and your meal, too. I can't come in the

afternoon as it is the market day. I've to carry Keshab Sahu's commodities in my bullockcart to the market. He must be waiting for me." Saying so, he left for the fields. He wore a knee-length lungi around his waist and a hand-woven towel on his shoulder; that was the dress in which he went everywhere. He was dark-complexioned with a hump on his back. He lived in a small thatched house in the slum with his wife and children. He considered it his primary duty to look after them, which he never neglected. He nursed no grievance against anyone, nor did he demand for anything in life.

Once he left, Satapathy heaved a sigh of relief. He knew Khelo was always like that. He never discriminated between the touchable and the untouchable. If he had touched him, he would have to change the sacred thread and purify himself before entering the puja room. Thanks to God that he was saved from those troubles. It was like escaping from the claws of a Royal Bengal Tiger. Bordering his land, Khelo had two acres of fertile crop field where he worked all day. He always kept a watch on Satapathy's land and informed him when it

was in short of water or when insects attacked it. He would drive away the cattle whenever they trespassed on it. He considered his land to be his own. That's why Satapathy liked him. On the other hand, when Khelo needed any help, he would approach Kela nana only, though there was no shortage of wealthy men in the slum. Kelu Satapathy was famous in the village of Sasana. He was as wealthy as he was kind. His complexion was dark in sharp contrast to his snow-white sacred thread. He had a big belly, long hands and legs and a pigtail like that of Chanakya. Besides managing his large family, he also took care of all the villagers. Previously he used to worship the village deity and Lord Shiva daily, but as he grew old, he was only supervising those done by others. The annual village festivals were conducted under his guidance. He was the most sought-after person not only in Sasana, but also in the villages around it.

Khelo Mian's property consisted of two acres of double-cropped farmland on the river bank with three palm trees on the ridges. In addition, he had a bullockcart that he used to carry things to and from the

village haat. During the month of Asadha, the newly-wed women booked his cart to go to their destinations. Sometimes, some traders hired his cart to transport their goods to distant places. He made a fast buck from it, with which he bought dresses for his wife and children. But his dress remained unchanged – a knee-length old lungi and a hand-woven towel of Kolkata-make.

With the paddy he borrowed from Kelu Satapathy, he was able to save his family from the pangs of hunger that year. His wife was good at housekeeping; she would feed her children and husband first, and then, think of herself. She had a smiling face. It was as if she had sworn before Allah to keep Khelo Mian's family happy.

Khelo was known for his honesty, for which people came forward to help him in times of distress. He used to carry paddy from Husenpur to Chandabali, cabbages from Chhachina Padhan hamlet to Jajpur *haat* and bamboo from Mamajila and Dobhabilia to the paper mill. He would deliver the goods, collect the money and hand it over to the senders. He would tuck the money to his waist to keep it safe and avoid suspected strangers during his return journey. He

knew where cooking materials and groceries were available on the way to cook for himself. He was quite dependable in those matters. He was so popular that even Hindus invited him when they had marriage ceremonies in their houses. The activities of the area would come to a standstill, once Khelo's bullockcart stopped rolling. On the top of those, he was an asset for the school; he carried cement, logs and tin or asbestos sheets for its construction work. On the days of Ganesh puja and Saraswati puja, his bullockcart was put to use for carrying utensils, rice, vegetables and groceries. He would also carry the luggage of the school students when they left for various examination centres in the distant towns at the time of the Matriculation examination.

That year, the harvest was not as was expected. Still, he went to Kela nana's house to return the paddy he had borrowed, with one-fourths more paddy towards interest. Satapathy told him smilingly, "Khelo ! This year, you don't have a good harvest. Where do you get paddy to repay me? If you give me all that you have, what will be left for your children? Take it back and keep it for yourself. We'll see to it next year. You aren't

going away anywhere, are you?" Khelo pleaded, "No, nana ! You keep it. I may borrow again if I need." Satapathy said, "Don't you think me as your own? We'll be in this village together, even after we die. You'll be buried and I'll be cremated. Take away your bag of paddy or I'll be angry." Khelo understood that Satapathy's anger was a sham; with a smile, he lifted the bag of paddy to his head and left.

Khelo Mian paid special attention to farming that year. He had sown the seeds on time. He hoped to have a good harvest to enable himself to return Kela nana's paddy first. What if he refused again? In that case, how would he borrow more from him? He would repay Kela nana with *Narasimha* paddy that was sweet-smelling. In the rainy season, when the palms would ripen, he would give some to Kela nana.

To his good luck, the weather was favourable that year. There was a good rainfall, as if Lord Indra was determined to help the farmers. Khelo was happy with the progress. He told his wife, "We'll have a good harvest this year; I'll repay Kela nana first." She said, "That's right. He who provided food for my children is no less than

Allah. Repaying his debt is the top priority, then, everything else. Do you know, this year Ramzan falls in the month of Sravana or Bhadraba. We've not been able to do anything for our children on that day. Should we present something to them this year or not?" "First things first," Khelo replied, "How can we have merriment until the debt is paid off ?"

It was the beginning of the month of Sravana. The sky was swept by sable clouds, with intermittent showers of rain that delighted the farmers. Khelo was happy to see palms ripening on the trees. He would give the first one to Kela nana to keep his word. He kept an eye on the palm trees while working in the field – whether it was weeding or building ridges to check the inflow of water. All the time he was waiting for the first fruit to fall. He would wrap it in his towel and take it to Kela nana. But, on second thoughts, he cancelled the idea. Kela nana might not like to touch his towel as he was an untouchable. If he did, he would have to bathe again and change his sacred thread into a new one. He thought it proper to wrap it in a banana leaf and carry it to him.

The month of Ramzan started. For the muslims all over the world, it was the holiest month of the year, which they observed with austerity. Azan would be read in the mosque five times a day. All would pray to Allah, their faces turned in the direction of Mecca. They would observe a fast from sunrise to sunset, and take food when night fell. Ramzan would come to an end after a month, at the sight of the Id moon. It would be marked by feasts and merriment. How could Khelo Mian's family be an exception ? People won't mind to exhaust the whole year's income and live by borrowings for the rest of the months.

Khelo Mian bought everything that his wife had prescribed. She told him, "O dear ! The palms might have ripened. Get one for us when it falls. We'll break fast with palm cake." Khelo was shocked. Didn't she know that he gave word to Kela nana to offer him ripe palms? When he reminded her of it, she fell silent.

It rained heavily for two days and two nights, causing flood. Khelo got up early in the morning and went straight to his fields to find them submerged by water. The river was in full swing with strong currents. Khelo

stood on the river bank for sometime. Just then, he heard the sound of a palm falling from the tree. Startled, he raced over to pick it. While washing it clean, his eyes fell on another palm lying nearby. He collected it and thought of taking both the fruits to Kela nana. He remembered the day he had told Kela nana about it. He had only laughed. Why did he laugh? Did he doubt his words ? If he had no faith in him, how did he agree to lend him so much paddy ? No, he would never doubt him. What made him laugh, then? Was it because he misspoke 'tala' (palm) as 'tar' ? He tried to pronounce it correctly, but failed. Disgusted, he said to himself, "Leave it ! It's time to keep my word. The sooner it's done, the better." He suddenly remembered it was time for the namaz. What would he do ? If he read the namaz first, where would he keep the palms? Just then, he saw Dhina, Kela nana's grandson, on the other side of the river. He was in habit of neglecting his studies and being caned in the school. Khelo called out to him, "Hey grandson ! What are you doing here in the morning ?"

Dhina : The river is in spate. I've come to see it.

Khelo : Well ! Now go back. I'm following you to your house.

Dhina : Why so early in the morning? What for?

Khelo : I've two ripe palms to deliver.

Dhina : Wait ! I'll swim across the river and collect it from you.

Puzzled, Khelo shouted at him, "No, no ! You won't !" But, who was going to listen to him ? In the twinkle of an eye, Dhina jumped into the river and reached Khelo in a short time, quite comfortably. In spite of Khelo's protest, for Kela nana might not like it, Dhina snatched the palms from his hands and jumped into the river again.

But, now the unexpected happened. A crocodile, appearing from nowhere, caught Dhina. Dhina cried out, "Grandpa !" Khelo looked at the river, and, seeing Dhina in the crocodile's grip, jumped into the river and pounced on the animal. The crocodile, surprised by the sudden attack, left Dhina and caught Khelo. It sank with him deep into the river and was lost. Dhina, however, managed to reach the other bank, completely exhausted. Suddenly, the thought of Khelo came to his mind. Where was he ? Did the crocodile eat him up ? He

called out to him at the top of his voice, "Grandpa ! Khelo grandpa !" There was no response. A deadly silence prevailed all over. Dhina cried bitterly. The noise brought the farmers working nearby to the spot. Learning from Dhina about what had happened, they broke down in grief. On hearing everything, Kelu Satapathy hurried to the river bank. Seeing a bundle floating on the river, someone brought it ashore. They found two palms wrapped in Khelo's towel. Seeing the palms, Kelu Satapathy plunged into thought. Waiving everyone aside, he came out of the crowd, crying out "Khelo ! Khelo !" Khelo's words rang in his ears, "Nana ! My children are unfed. Give me ten *gaunis* of paddy. I'll give you *Narasimha* paddy in return. I'll give you ripe palms. I'll give you one-fourths more paddy as interest." His pace quickened. By that time the sun had ascended the middle of the sky. His body and its shadow have mingled with each other. In the surrounding void he looked like a man, empty inside-a hollow man.

The Election

Jhampula was sitting on the embankment of the canal, leaning his back against a peepal tree. He was more than seventy, his body looking like a bag of bones. As he was blind in one eye since his birth, the children of the village amused themselves by calling him "one-eyed Jhampula". When he was young, such an address rattled him, but, at this ripe age, he did not mind it at all. A man of few words, now he was too old to do hard work. Nevertheless, he did errands for some of the villagers. No work, no money. No money, no food. A poor man's life in old age was pitiable. In today's world all were struggling for their own survival; who had the time to think of the poor ? Those who were well-to-

do earlier, were now finding it difficult to manage their own family. When men of means were not able to meet their wants, expecting generosity from them was quite absurd.

The only breadwinner in Jhampula's family was his son. His income was too little to feed his children. In spite of that he never neglected his father. The daughter-in-law was a bit grumpy. Why blame her? When she did not have enough for her children, it was natural on her part to react. She was quite nice in her manners when Jhampula used to earn. Her children were small by then. Now they grew up; the demand increased while Jhampula became unable to work. Still, he was not sitting idle at home. He cleaned the cow-sheds and took care of the cows of some of the villagers. He also kept a watch on their crop fields and carried out their orders which was not tiresome. They paid money for his services. Sometimes, someone would give him a piece of cake or a handful of puffed rice or a cup of tea. He would save some of it for his granddaughter. He would take her into his lap, feed her with his own hands and kiss her. It pleased his daughter-in-law. She would say to herself,

"Even if the father-in-law is old, he worked as much as he was able to. He is not at all a burden to us."

That day he left home at the peep of dawn and finished cleaning two cowsheds in the village. He ate a mouthful of puffed rice and sipped a little tea that someone had offered. As he did not feel well, he was sitting under a tree on his way back. Some of the passers-by had a word with him, though he showed no interest in it. He was lost in thought : Those good old days will not come back. It was not a world of wants, then. Vegetables were quite cheap. Look ! Now twelve rupees for one kilogram of brinjals ! What has happened to this country ? How will the poor men survive ? To the rich, it doesn't make any difference. But what about people such as we are ?

A mild wind was blowing with a touch of coolness. Preoccupied with those thoughts, Jhampula could not know when sleep overcame him.

He fell asleep there, under the tree, snoring.

Disturbed by a loud noise coming from across the canal, he woke up. Wiping his eyes, he looked in that direction. He was

surprised at the unfamiliar sight of a group of gentlemen in the village. All of them were dressed in white; some of them had flags in their hands. They were led along by a gentleman in dhoti and panjabi. He was all smiles; he was greeting everyone he saw on the way. Who were they? He stared at them in surprise. Could they be a *kirtan* party from some neighbouring village ? But where were their musical instruments such as *mridanga* and cymbals ? He could hear slogans only. One of them would start raising a slogan; others would repeat it. He could not locate who they might be. But from their dress he was convinced that they were from well-to-do families. But why did they land in a village where poor men lived ? If they had some work with anyone, they would have sent for him, instead of walking down all the way. Jhampula was in a quandary. Who should he ask ? Who would solve the mystery? Slowly he stood up.

In the evening, a discussion relating to the incident was going on in the village. People were saying there would be election very soon. The babu, who was a candidate himself, had come to their village. He requested everyone with folded hands to vote

for him. His party had been in power for a long time, dedicated to the welfare of the poor. Their objective was to eradicate poverty from the country and to provide equal right and opportunity for all. Jhampula could not make out what an election was and what he had got to do with it. Who to ask ? Finding Khatua, a man of his age, sitting on the verandah, he went to him and asked, "What do they mean by election ?" Khatua Jena, with a deadpan expression on his face, replied, "It means voting. You spent most of your life in Kashmir. How would you know it ? We know, because we are here."

Jhampula remembered he had voted once in Kashmir.He would do the same thing here. Good ! He would get ten rupees for that. His son and daughter-in-law would also get ten rupees each. He did not know whether his grandson and granddaughter were eligible for it. His family would receive at least thirty rupees, doing nothing. During the voting in Kashmir, a lorry pulled up at their slum. Many babus had come in it. Their contractor babu sent for all the coolies including him. When all reached there, he paid ten rupees to each of them and showed them how to use the ballot paper. He told

him, "If anyone asks your name, say you're Rashid, the son of Sahid from ..." He could not make out the import of what he said. He said to the contractor, "Babu ! My name is Jhampula Jena. My father's name is Pahali Jena. I'm from..." The babu roared out, "Stop !" His eyes burning with anger, he warned him, "Don't forget your name is Rashid. Your father's name is Sahid. Do you understand ?"

Jhampula wondered : He was an Odia ; Rashid was a muslim name. Did the babu change his identity, from Odia to non-Odia, by paying ten rupees ? He was scared. If it was so, he would not be allowed to enter his village. All would look down upon him. Was he going to lose everything for only ten rupees ? How could he forsake his wife, children and family ? Seeing his tearful eyes, the babu said, "You've nothing to fear. If you don't obey me, remember *sala*, I'll break your bones. You've lost one eye, I'll gouge out the other one. *Sala* ! You'll be blind and beg from door to door."

Panicked, he agreed to do as he said. He understood that he would be Rashid, only while stamping the ballot paper. After that, he would be Jhampula again. No one would

know it. He would stamp the paper silently and come out. The person whom he would tell his name would not create any problem in future. It was better to grab ten rupees and be Rashid for one minute than to get thrashed by the man who paid him. It was wise to obey him like a good boy.

That was all about his experience of voting. What was "voting" in Kashmir was "election" in his village. But, there, the candidates did neither dress themselves in dhoti and panjabi, nor travel from one village to another. They only sent the vehicle and the money. People, changing their names from Jhampula to Rashid, cast their votes. "Why so much fuss here?" he thought, "Ours is a remote countryside. May be, this is the custom here." He tiptoed to Khatua, the only fellow worthy of his confidence. He had never betrayed him since his childhood.

"Have you ever voted in the election, Khatua ?" Jhampula whispered to him. Khatua replied, "Voting and myself ? I've never cast my vote. Working in the babu's house is all that I know. I can't waste my time for these silly things !" Jhampula was surprised. Why did he say that? Didn't they pay him ten rupees on the day of voting ?

Or was he lying ? Jhampula was confused. He could not disbelieve Khatua. Might be, someone else had grabbed his money as he had gone to the field to work.

Jhampula thought it wise to caution him for the coming election. He told him, "Now you aren't a servant in somebody's house. This time we will go together to cast our vote. A babu with a handlebar moustache will arrive in a big lorry. He will give ten rupees to each of us. He will ask me to say my name is Rashid and my father's name is Sahid. I don't know how they'll name you. We'll tell our new names to the voting officer confidentially. No one present there will be able to hear us. We'll cast our vote and come back. But we are not going to become non-Odias at all. No one in our village will know it. There is no cause to fear. We're quite old; it'll be no offence if we change our names at the time of voting without anyone's knowledge. It is between you and me. Don't let it on to anyone. I know you since my childhood. I rely on you. Therefore, I passed on the secret to you."

Jhampula was not sure if Khatua got him fully. He expected to guess something from his facial expression, but it was too dark

to see his face. He left the place silently and waited for that fateful day when the babu with a handlebar moustache would arrive in a lorry and give him a ten-rupee note.

Srikanta Sir

When Srikanta babu, completing his Intermediate in Arts from Bhadrak college, joined Ahiyas High School as a teacher, I was a student of class six there. His first appearance in our class caused a scare in me. He was a five-feet-tall man, dressed in dhoti and long-sleeved shirt. He sat silently for sometime; perhaps planning how to begin. He started asking each of us our name and the village we came from. When it was my turn, I stood up, but I felt my throat too clogged to speak anything. Collecting myself, I tried again, but I had still a lump in my throat. I was sure my silence would annoy him. Observing my helplessness, he said with a smile, "Have no fear. Tell me your

name." I felt a bit relieved and looked around at my classmates. Those waiting for their turn were sitting silently, but those who had already passed the test winked at me and pursed their lips. I was more frightened, but for a moment. I swallowed hard. I could hardly imagine what the teacher might be thinking of me. He got up from his seat slowly and came to me. Putting his hand on my shoulder, he asked me my name again, his eyes glinting with hope. At last, a word came out of my mouth : Sabyasachi. I was startled to hear my own voice that sounded like a husky whisper. With a smile of appreciation, he said, "Quite a good name ! Where is your village ?" I answered to him politely. I don't remember what questions he asked next, but I am sure he used to ask me many questions in the class on regular basis. If my answer was right, he praised me. If it was wrong, punishment was meted out to me without fail. It was my conviction that he put questions to me deliberately only to harass me. Was he taking revenge on me for failing to impress him at first sight ?

Days crawled by. I made it a habit to go to his class well prepared. He did not only burden me with huge homework, but he also

assigned to me extracurricular activities during the Ganesh puja and the Saraswati puja, that made me completely worn out. Wherever he saw me, either in the playground or on the road, he would never forget to pass on instructions to me. In my lonely moments, my thoughts turned to him, making me annoyed and befuddled. I thought of leaving the school, but that was the only school in the locality and I was left with no other alternative. I attended my classes quite mechanically. I obeyed all that he asked me to do, but I hesitated to meet him. I felt happy if the day passed without being reprimanded by him. I took all measures to avoid him.

Like every other year, that year too, the school decided to stage a play on the day of the Saraswati puja. As was the custom, the teachers as well as the students were to take part in it. I was scared when I was asked to join the rehearsal. Never before did I watch a play, let alone take part in it. But I had to withdraw my protest for fear of the Mathematics teacher who was in charge of the play. He was so ruthless that he did not spare even the boy who stood first in

Mathematics of caning in the class. We were mortally afraid of him.

The rehearsal of the play started. In the first practice session, my hands and feet began to tremble like bamboo leaves. The Mathematics sir was displeased. He told me mockingly, "You look so handsome ! Why are you so nervous, then?" He asked me to deliver the dialogues which made me more frightened. He turned to Srikanta sir and said, "This boy is good for nothing. Like a pumpkin flower, he is all good to look at, but of no use."

I was relieved to imagine that they would surely drop me. In response to the hurtful words of the Mathematics sir, Srikanta sir said, "No, he will do it. I take the responsibility of improving him." Hearing this, I plunged into despair again. Sweat poured off my body. I was scared. The world seemed a black void to me.

The rehearsal continued with the Mathematics sir as the director and Srikanta sir as the supervisor. My fear gradually vanished, and I became more confident after memorising my portion of dialogues. But as the day of performance drew near, I felt more and more nervous. At last, that day

arrived. In the evening the stage was lighted with a petromax lamp, arranged by Akbar Mian. Hun babu of the nearby village powdered our faces and costumed us. A great crowd had gathered to watch the play. From behind the screen, when I saw the sea of humanity in front of the stage, my heart palpitated. The consolation and inspiration of the Mathematics sir and Srikanta sir did not seem to work on me. In that winter night, I felt my throat dry and constricted. The whistle blew and the curtain was raised. With my shaking body covered with glamorous costume, I entered the stage. Collecting myself, I was determined to give my best. I delivered my dialogues eloquently. Even when I failed to remember certain lines, I recreated it. At the end of the scene, Srikanta sir patted me and remarked, "It's alright ! Don't be brittle. Don't worry about the dialogue. It'll come automatically. Your performance was not bad."

His words encouraged me. I tried to get rid of my fear. I took it easy and performed to the best of my ability. The play, overall, was a great success.

The next day was the day of rest. The day after the next, we went to the school, as

usual. It was the last period of the day. The teacher informed me that I was wanted by the Headmaster. I was frightened at the mention of the Headmaster whom we believed to be an institution of panic. Usually, when someone committed an offence, he was called by the Headmaster to be awarded penalty. I proceeded towards the Headmaster's room like a machine.

Drawing the screen of his room, when I was trying to bow to the Headmaster, I got stuck to the screen and was narrowly saved from falling down. When I sidled inside I found there were many teachers in the room including Mathematics sir and Srikanta sir. Besides them, there was another man with a beard whom I saw for the first time. I had seen ascetics in ochre clothes and some lungi-clad muslims keeping a beard. But never had I seen a gentleman in dhoti and shirt with a beard. It came to me as a surprise.

That babu, with a smile, asked me, "Have you ever acted in a play before?" I swung my head, meaning "No, I haven't." I don't know how he took it. The Headmaster told me, "In appreciation of your performance, the Secretary sir of the school

is pleased to offer you this book as prize." I did not know what to reply. To save the situation, Srikanta sir said, "Receive the book and bow to everyone here." I obeyed him. Taking the book from the headmaster, I was about to leave when the Secretary sir told me, "Read this book carefully. I'll ask you questions on it when I come next time."

I could not take his advice well. I thought he was making my life more miserable by adding one more book to those I already had to finish. Why did he give me the book and why would he ask me questions on it? He would be displeased if I failed to give a satisfactory answer. He might even fail me in the examination. I was worried.

No sooner did I reach the classroom with the book, than the last bell rang. While leaving the school, I heard the Mathematics sir saying, "I had never thought Sabyasachi would perform so well. His acting made me spellbound. He will make us proud in future." I could not make out the last sentence he said. I had read the proverb : Pride goes before a fall. I also knew God dislikes a man who is proud. Why did he say that ? Did he mean that I was proud of

my acting ? Didn't he know that I was not proud, only scared ? Why, then, was he coming to me from time to time to advise me not to be nervous ? O I'm confused ! I can't say whether he meant praise or hate. My only thought was : If it was hate he would surely cane me in the class. If praise, he would scold me instead of beating."

Caught in the labyrinth of apprehensions, I waited for the school time next day.

Not to Worry

Akbar and Rashid were brothers, though no one was sure whether they were sons of the same parents. It was because Akbar was very tall, about six feet, and slim, whereas Rashid was healthy and of average height. They lived in the slum near the school, but they used to spend the whole day in another house, its walls painted red, by the roadside. Only at the midday, they would go to the slum to have their meals, that too, one at a time. Both of them had their shops in the roadside house : a bicycle repairing shop and the other, dealing in petromax lamps. At present, they have become outdated, but during the days of post-independence, when there was no road, no electricity, nor too

many bicycles, they had a great demand. How forward-looking those brothers must be ! The bicycle shop was meant for repairing works, inflating tubes with bicycle-pump and providing bicycles for hire. The other shop rented petromax lamps, which when lighted, made the night look as bright as the day. When any educated man wanted to go somewhere, he would come to the bicycle shop to hire one. He would be allowed to have it only if one of the brothers knew him. The rich men who had bicycles already would also come there either for patching the tyre or oiling the bicycle. Therefore, Rashid, who managed the shop, was popular among the rich and the educated mass. Many young men also came to him to learn riding for two annas an hour.

Akbar's shop dealt in petromax lamps. Popularly known as Ago Mian, he had a great demand in times of festivals, marriage and sacred thread ceremonies. During the Dola and the Raja festivals, people made a beeline for his shop. On those days, Ago Mian did not have a moment of respite. His business activity commenced from the month of Pausa, in which people kept themselves busy cutting and reaping

paddy. On the first day of the month, Lakshminarayana puja was held in the chaupadhi of the zamindar, Ghanababu; it was the only festival in the area that continued for seven days and seven nights. There used to be the *pala* every evening, followed by the opera. The zamindar's house was full to capacity with guests and relatives. The kitchen remained open from early morning to midnight. During those days, Ago Mian's services were indispensable. He would turn up at four in the afternoon every day. He would fill the petromax lamps with oil, pump them, light them and hang them in a row from the ceiling of the front verandah of the zamindar's house. Those were the days of the winter months, which were short, so Ago Mian had to reach before the evening set in.

The *pala* continued till midnight. Between the evening and the midnight, Ago used to pump the lamps two times. The dimly lighted place simmered with light. In the interval between the *pala* and the opera, he would be given food to eat. He used to eat from a banana leaf by turning it over. The zamindar's son had instructed his cooks to feed him separately and not to serve him

the offerings of God, as his religion did not allow it. After meal, if he felt dopey, he would choose a vacant place behind the audience and fall asleep, covering himself with a grass-mat. Waking up at the end of the *pala*, he would stand among others to receive the blessings of the singer. If someone made fun of it, he would say with a smile, "Satya Narayana and Satyapira are one and the same."

The opera started at midnight. Ago had checked the lamps earlier to ensure that they posed no inconvenience during the course of the play.

Once a play "Sita thaba" (Search for Sita) was being enacted. Ravana, a ferocious-looking demon with ten heads and a mask made of cardboard, entered the stage. While kidnapping Sita, the boy playing her role wept and cried for help. It was so heart-touching that the women watching the play broke down in grief, tears slashing down from their eyes. In the next scene, came Rama and Lakshmana, and not finding Sita there, they combed the stage, presuming it to be the forest. When their search failed to trace her, they went back, worried and full of remorse. Then it was Hanuman's turn. A big

white gourd tucked under his arm, he took another way to enter the stage. While advancing, he dashed against a bamboo pole, serving as the lamp-post. The sudden jerk made the gourd drop to the ground, breaking its shell into pieces. As it was rotten inside, it gave out a putrid smell, too unbearable for the audience to remain steady in their seats. Apprehending that something had gone wrong, they began to run and were scattered around the stage. In confusion, some of them hit themselves against the bamboo light post. In consequence, the petromax lamp hanging from it fell off, and turned into a ball of fire as soon as it touched the ground. The raging fire injured many and destroyed most of the belongings of the opera party. A great commotion followed, and the play was suspended with immediate effect.

The hubbub woke Ago Mian up. The sight of fire made his eyes wide open. He ran to the spot and found the petromax lamp, the costliest of all those he had, in flames, completely damaged. He slumped down onto the ground in despair. It was a great loss, and he had no means to make for it. When he heard the whole story, he held Hanuman accountable for all that had

happened. It was his waywardness that caused the accident. Without a second thought, he went straight to the director of the opera party. The director was sitting gloomily, worried about Hanuman's stupidity. When he saw Ago, he turned away his face. But Ago Mian shouted at him angrily, "Hey director ! Are you doing it for the first time ? Where is that monkey ? He had damaged my brand new petromax lamp. Today it was used for the first time. He has ruined my business. Let him pay its full cost or replace it with a new one. He is showing off his monkey tricks !" Everyone tried to console him, but no one talked about the compensation. Ago was worried.

At last the matter was reported to Ghanababu, who hosted the function and the most influential man in the area. As an advocate, he was handling ten cases in the Patna High Court. He was asleep when the incident took place. Having heard the whole story, he said, "We'll decide it tomorrow morning." All left to their respective places. The most worried of all were Ago Mian and Hanuman, who did not have a wink of sleep that night.

Hanuman was lost in thought :

"Ghanababu is a man of principle. He knows Ago Mian for many years. He has been supplying lamps for his puja every year. If tomorrow morning he holds me guilty, what will I do ? I'm a poor man. For my livelihood, I'm acting as monkey, painting my face black. Where shall I get the money to pay the fine ? Why should the owner of the opera party take the responsibility ? Who will argue in my favour in Ghanababu's court ?" He turned side and remembered his widowed mother who lived in a small thatched house in the village. He imagined himself as Bhisma lying on a bed of arrows.

Ago Mian did not get much sleep that night. He went on thinking : The Dola festival was only a few months away. It was the time when he expected more income. He used to supply petromax lamps for the Dola festival of Lord Radhakanta who was worshipped at Gandakula village, on the banks of the river. He was the presiding deity of the Paikrays of Kamalapur. No social function in the area would begin without offering puja to Sri Sri Radhakanta Deva. The Paikray family had friendly relationship with many well-to-do people of the area who cooperated in holding the festival. The deity

was taken to Olasahi in a procession, where devotees congregate to celebrate His arrival. The beauty of the festival was supplemented by many entertainment programmes, such as martial art with lathis, horse dance, folk dance etc. Display of music and fire crackers was an added attraction. Last year, he could not provide enough light, which was pointed out by Kanhu Das, the lathi-player. He had said, "Ago bhai ! The light is too dim for me to see clearly. Don't blame me if my lathi hits you." As a remedy, he had decided to buy an expensive lamp. He used it first at the Lakshminarayan puja considering it to be an auspicious beginning. But it had never occurred to him that it would put an end to his business.

Preoccupied with those thoughts, he could not know when sleep overcame him.When he woke up, he found a dog licking the big toe of his right foot. He went home and freshened himself before he started for Ghanababu's house. Seeing him going out, his wife asked him anxiously, "Where are you going so early in the morning?" He told her to wait until he returned.

It was eleven in the morning when proceedings started in Ghanababu's court.

With folded hands, Hanuman, the accused, stated, "My Lord ! I confess my guilt. Whatever I did, it was to entertain the spectators. I had thought it would wake up those who were feeling sleepy. I apologise for it, My Lord !" Ainthu Sahu, the witness, complained, "That lamp fell to the ground causing fire to spread. My son and daughter were sitting nearby. Thanks to God that my children were saved, though the shawl they wrapped around them caught fire. Otherwise, my clan would have been wiped out forever." Then Ago Mian, wiping his eyes, stated, "Babu ! You know everything. What more shall I tell you ? This lamp meant everything to me. It was the source of my livelihood. This Hanu has ruined everything. You're a great judge; I leave it to your wisdom." Next came the director of the opera party who said, "Our Hanuman is innocent. His intention was to provide fun for the spectators. He didn't know the white gourd was rotten and that it would fall off his arm and give out a foul smell that caused commotion in the crowd. God worshipped here belongs to the babu. It is the babu who played host to the show and hired the lamps. He had given the white

gourd and the accident occurred in front of his house. So, how can it be our fault?" The director's argument rattled Ghanababu. He sent for his servant, Brundaban alias Burunda. With folded hands, Burunda explained, "Sir ! Like every year, this year too, the gourds were collected from the roof and stored on the verandah. They were covered with a tarpaulin, as instructed by Saantani. I had checked them; they were alright. It was my misfortune that the gourd which was fine in the morning, got rotten in the evening ! I've no fault, Sir !" Ghanababu stood up. While going back into the house, he said, "Yes, you're not at fault. The gourd is a vegetable. Sometimes it gets rotten. No one knows when it will rot. Secondly, Hanuman is supposed to act like a monkey. There is nothing wrong in it. And the bamboo pole can't be blamed. When a monkey climbs a tree, fruits fall off. The lamp, like a fruit, fell off the pole. Moreover, a lamp is a fragile object; so it broke." Saying so, he left. All praised Ghanababu's sense of judgement. The director, with a smile, proposed to stage another play in honour of the Lord. But it would not be "Sita thaba" (Search for Sita), but

"Draupadi Bastraharana" (Disrobing Draupadi).

Ago Mian returned home, his face pale and eyes awash with emotion. Hearing from his brother about all that had happened, Rashid consoled him, saying, "Not to worry-I knew Ghanababu would give such a verdict. We'll make for the loss in a year's time." Ago Mian regained his confidence. He felt proud of having such a brother with him.

The Tale of a Donkey

Once upon a time there lived a donkey who used to work in the circus. Years of hard labour had reduced him to a bag of bones. For him, amusing the spectators was secondary; his primary duty was to carry loads from one place to another. For all that he did, he was given a little food to eat-a sheaf of straw or half a bucket of water. That was all with which he sustained himself. He had got used to it since he joined the circus.

Once the circus was travelling from one town to another. The human beings left in cars and buses; the animals such as tigers, bears and lions went by truck while elephants and camels walked along, unencumbered. But God had written a

donkey's fate in a different language. He had to walk a long way, carrying a heavy load on his back. When he was slow, the keeper would give him a prod that made him leap forward. He would cast a vacant look on the sky and consume the humiliation silently.

After walking long, he was stopped under a tree near a pond at the end of a village. The keeper sat down there for rest. The donkey, with the load still on his back, was faint with hunger. When the keeper fell asleep under the tree, he sneaked into the nearby field, driven by the greed for some green grass. He went on munching single-mindedly. After sometime, when he felt a bit relieved, he raised his head and found a donkey standing before him. The stranger regarded the circus donkey for a few moments and then, asked, "Excuse me. Aren't you Rama babu?"

Hearing his name from a stranger, he stared at him in surprise. How could anyone in that remote village know him ? Getting closer to him, the circus donkey said, "Excuse me. I don't locate you. I shall be happy if you let me know who you are. You're right. I'm Rama". Hearing this, the stranger's face lit up. He started dancing merrily. After a

while, he stopped and said, "Hey Rama ! Don't you recognise me ? I'm Nila. We were born in the same village. We were great friends in our childhood. We used to roam, graze, bathe and play together. Those who saw us thought we were brothers. Time ticked away; we attained our youth. Both of us were the healthiest, the merriest and the wisest of all the donkeys of our time. But, ironically, our virtues stood in our way in our lives. My master employed me in his business. That made us separated from each other. It is not my job, but our separation that hurt me much. I was sad. After some days I heard that you were sold to a trader. Thereafter, we seldom met. When I remember you, I break down in grief. The sight of the meadow, the groves and the river bank bring me back the past memories. Believe me ! When I come to graze in the field, I moon over you. It is difficult to forget the days of childhood. I haven't forgotten you at all. But I'm sorry to find you've forgotten me. Still, I'm very happy to see you after a long time. Come with me; let's spend sometime in the meadow together. Let's have a mouthful of young leaves of grass. Let's drink some water from the pond. Let's have

a heart-to-heart talk with each other for a while."

Listening to Nila's words, the good old days of his childhood flashed through Rama's mind. He remembered how he and Nila used to play, laugh and roam along the river bank together, how they got into mischief trespassing on the cropfields of the villagers, eating a bellyful of paddy and vegetables. Sometimes they were caught and beaten. At times they escaped the fury of the land owners, but they were punished later by their masters when they were informed about it.

He remembered how once, at Nila's insistence, they entered a neighbour's paddy field and ate the young plants to their heart's content. When the owner of the land caught sight of them, he chased them with a cudgel. They ran breathlessly and escaped, but his master, being informed, was furious. His servant thrashed him severely and tethered him for three days. He gave him no food, only a little water. When he brayed in hunger, the servant scolded him harshly, "You've eaten enough paddy. What more do you want ? *Sala* ! You ungrateful ! You've damaged the reputation of my master. I'll

keep you in confinement for the next fifteen days. That's the only way to teach you a lesson."

He felt sorry that his untoward behaviour had put his master to shame. He promised to keep out of mischief in future. He held Nila accountable for all this. He felt that his disgraceful act was more painful than hunger.

Like a bolt from the blue, one morning, two men came to him. They regarded him for sometime, went around him and poked his back in appreciation. At first he could not make out anything. Later, he guessed that some misfortune was going to befall him. After a while, the servant gave him a bundle of grass to eat. He caressed him fondly with tearful eyes. He was surprised to find him so unhappy. He could not eat the grass; he only sighed.

Then, his eyes fell on his master. He was tucking a thick wad of currency notes to his waist, after counting them. Those men unhitched him from the peg and pulled him. He was now convinced that he was leaving his birthplace forever. In protest, he did not budge an inch, but those cruel men started beating him. Rama thought his master

would come to his rescue; he would refund the money and take him back to his house. But nothing of that sort happened. They thrashed him ruthlessly and pulled him with all their might. He knew struggling to stay back was of no use. Men were selfish by nature. They would love you as long as you worked for them. The moment you did anything against their will, you would be fired. They would never admit their mistake; they would tell hundreds of lies to cover one. They would resort to mud-slinging or assassinating the character of their opponent. They would say, "He belongs to the enemy camp" or "He is hand in gloves with foreign elements." They would not even hesitate to label Mahatma Gandhi, the greatest national leader, a supporter of terrorism or that he had a huge amount of money in foreign banks or he was a C.I.A. agent. Look at him ! He was sold to another man. His owner got the money, and he was caned. O God ! How would it have been if his owner was sold to someone and got the cane! Then, he would know how caning was like ! Without protesting any longer, he followed his new master and carried out his orders. Sometimes he was praised,

sometimes beaten. But it was of no consequence to him. He believed none to be his own. All men were equally selfish and cruel.

Since then, he had changed many masters and worked in various capacities. He was abused and ill-treated. But he had never complained about it. He had not yet seen his master at present. But he was intimately close to his fellow-workers. He seemed to have lost himself in the thoughts of his unpleasant past.

Finding Rama absent-minded, Nila asked him, "Hey Rama ! What are you thinking ? Must be about our childhood days, isn't it?" Jolted out of his trance, Rama replied, "Yes, brother ! I remember each and every day we had spent together. I'm sorry I could not recognise the places with which I was closely associated when I was a child. How many times didn't I fall into this pond? Don't you remember what had happened one summer ? There had been no rain for many days. The river and canal were dry. People were crying for a drop of water, let alone the animals. There was no hope for rain anywhere. It was noontime when we came to the field to graze. There was no

grass; we were only sniffing at the hot ground. Our throats were dry and constricted. We went to the pond to drink water. The bathing ghat was crowded with people, where we could not have access. But we were so parched that we ventured into the mud to reach the water's edge. After drinking some water, we found our legs stuck into the mud. You could get out of it somehow, but I couldn't. You encouraged me to try again and again and not to lose patience. Finally, that worked, and I escaped from the well of death. Had you not been with me, I could have died that day. Can I ever forget it? Really, brother ! I'm unfortunate. My servility has destroyed my good senses. See, I've forgotten my birthplace, too." He felt like crying.

Nila consoled him; he caressed him fondly. Rama was relieved. Collecting himself, he told Nila, "Well, brother ! You must be doing well. I can imagine it by a look at your health."

Nila said smilingly, "Don't worry for me. I'm fine. My master has a laundry. We go to the village to collect dirty clothes and deliver the ones that are washed and pressed. However big the pile of clothes may

be, it is never heavy. My owner washes clothes in the pond while I graze in the field and drink water from the pond. Sometimes I sleep under the tree. When washing is done, we return home. My master and his wife are the only members of their family. After they take their meals, they give me whatever is left over, enough for me to sustain myself. I'm quite comfortable here. No scolding, no beating."

Nila was praising his master breathlessly. Heaving a deep sigh, Rama said, "Yes, brother ! You're fortunate to have such a master !"

Nila was happy to hear his master being praised. He came closer to him and told him confidentially, "Rama ! We've been friends since our childhood. I'm sorry to see your plight. It makes me weep. Could you do as I say ? The volume of my master's business has gone up in the meantime. He is planning to buy another donkey. You see, if I am made to work with someone I don't know, I may invite trouble for myself. The new appointee may speak against me to my master to safeguard his position. It may result in my master losing confidence in me. If you join me, we'll work together. We'll walk

across the field once again. Our old friendship will be stronger. You will return to your birthplace. How nice it will be !"

Rama was thrilled, but for a while. Suppressing his feelings, he said with a sigh, "No, Nila ! It's not possible on my part to come back to you, to my birthplace."

"But, why ?" Nila asked anxiously. "Don't the field, the pond, the groves and the river bank delight you ? Don't you love them ?"

Rama said, "That's not the point. In fact, their beauty enchants me. But I can't leave the circus. I've worked there for a long time. I've undergone much suffering. Still, I'm there with a hope, a hope for future." Nila looked at him, his mouth hung open in amazement. He asked, "What do you mean by future?" Rama replied, "I don't know, but I can tell you from where I learnt that word. A great change is going to occur in my life. Since you're my childhood friend, how can I keep you in the dark?"

Rama ran his eyes over the keeper sleeping under the tree. Then he told Nila in a whispering voice, "It happened ten years ago. One day, the most beautiful girl in the circus, in a practice session, was showing

tricks on the swing. A net was hung under the swing as a safety measure. The ringmaster was standing near her. I was watching her skills standing a little distance away. She was swinging from one side to another. Sometimes, she showed tricks by hanging from the swing with the support of her hands and feet. While in action, she slipped from the swing and fell to the net. She was frightened to see the ringmaster furious. He roared out, 'Why did you fall off? It seems you don't learn anything. I warn you, if you repeat the mistake in future, I'll marry you with this donkey.'

The girl was deeply embarrassed. She cast a furtive glance on me. In response, I gave her a welcome wink. She ran away from there, blushing. Since that day I have been watching her manners, which suggest that she is sweet on me. I've been waiting for the day she would fall off the swing again. I know the ringmaster well; he is a man of his word. Once that happens, the whole history of the donkey community will be changed. All the beautiful girls working in the circus will be ours. What a fun it would be ! Won't you be happy to see me enjoying such a fortune ? Oh, brother ! We are born

as donkeys. Now that an opportunity such as this is knocking at my door, would you suggest to me to forgo it for the sake of this remote countryside which I call my birthplace?" Nila was dumbstruck to hear the revelations made by Rama.

The keeper woke up from sleep. He looked around and found the donkey in the field, engaged in conversation. He took the prod and dealt him with a few strokes on his back. Embarrassed, Rama stepped forward.

The Sahib And The Monkey

Those were the days when the Britishers used to rule our country. In a certain town there was a big office headed by a sahib. There was a badababu (head clerk) who commanded the respect of all the employees. In the morning, when he started for the office, spectacularly dressed, even a gravid cow would make way for him. His dress consisted of a dhoti, a long-sleeved shirt with a detachable collar, tucked into it and a coat. The well-folded front end of the dhoti passed between his legs and tucked at the back. He wore a pair of boots with socks, a cap made of *shola* pith and a pair of glasses. In such a

marvellous attire, when he passed the street, riding a bicycle, the young women of the locality went into a swoon.

Badababu had authority not only over the employees of the office, but also over the people of the hamlet he lived in. Nothing ever happened there without his knowledge. Not a leaf on the tree would move without his command. All the festivals in the hamlet were held under his direct guidance. During Durga Puja, he would dress himself in silk and conduct the ritualistic proceedings of worship himself. During the Dola festival, the idol of God would first visit his house for votive offerings. On the day of Moharrum, playing of drums started from his house. On all such occasions, he was given priority over others.

Badababu had earned the trust of the sahib, who was his boss. In all official matters, he followed badababu's suggestions blindly. If badababu said a child flew away, the sahib would believe it, considering that it was a country of black magic where strange things happened. His closeness with the sahib had made him immensely powerful. The future of the employees of the office depended on his whim. Such a

situation led the employees to compete with each other to gain his favour.

During the Raja festival that year, an opera show was arranged in badababu's hamlet. He had hired one of the best opera parties of the state, without worrying about the expenses. For him, it was a prestige issue. The amount of contribution that each house had to make was decided by none other than badababu.

On the first day of the show, badababu went to the office to invite the sahib. The sahib had no idea about it; he looked at badababu, his eyes full of wonder. Badababu explained politely, "Sahib ! Opera means drama... means open air... means *sahi*... means *basti*... Means *pada*... means hamlet... *aji* means this night. We come... Drama see. I wait." Guessing what he meant to say, the sahib gave his consent by nodding his head.

The news that the sahib, the representative of the British government, a whiteman through and through, was coming to the hamlet to see the opera spread like wild fire all over the hamlet. Badababu's joy knew no bounds; he felt like floating in the air. He thought the achievement would

surely improve his public image. The people of the neighbourng hamlet would be green with envy at his success.

The road leading to the hamlet as well as badababu's house were refurbished. The sahib was coming there as a guest of honour; he must be entertained with their hospitality. To meet the expenses, badababu had already grabbed a lion share of the collection. He knew what the sahib would like to have and how much it would cost. How could the rustics of the hamlet know it?

At the appointed time, the sahib's car pulled up at the hamlet. Two men in uniform were escorting his car. Running all the way, they were gasping. Thanks to God that they got some relief when the car slowed down on the narrow lane passing through the hamlet. Badababu ran to the car and welcomed the sahib with a bouquet. The sahib smiled and thanked him. The onlookers stood agape, watching the sahib's relation with badababu. They whispered among themselves, "Each and every son should take example from badababu, how he brings glory not only to himself, but also to his ancestors and the people of his locality."

The sahib was given a special treatment. Then he left for the venue, flanked by badababu and some elderly persons of the hamlet. No sooner did he take his seat, than the music began to play. The audience were thrilled to see the sahib sitting among them. The play started and scene after scene continued, the actors and musicians doing their best.

The sahib watched the play for quite sometime, but he could not make head nor tail of it. Badababu was explaining the story to him in his characteristic broken English. But the sahib was neither listening to him nor enjoying the play. Suddenly a great cheer went up from the audience. The sahib looked at badababu to know what it was about. Badababu said, "Sahib ! Hanuman is coming."

The sahib : What ? What ?

Badababu : Hanuman, the *duta* of Rama Chandra, the *pua* of Dasaratha.

The sahib : What Hanuman ? What Dasaratha? What *pua* ? What Ramachandar ? And what *duta* ?

Badababu (Swallowing hard) Sahib! One state Ayodhya... near Delhi... that Old King Dasarath... His son...

Ramachandra... His wife Sita... kidnap Ravana... Now Hanuman come... Sita search.

Just then, Hanuman appeared on the stage, his face painted black. He had a pumpkin in one hand and a coconut in the other. He began to chatter and dance wildly on the stage. The children clapped and burst into laughter. Seeing him, the sahib asked :

What is that nasty thing ?

Badababu : Sahib ! Hanu... not man... only Hanuman meaning monkey.

The sahib : Where is monkey ?

Badababu Sir ! That man... Hanuman... monkey... manlike monkey... black face... long tail... holy monkey... Rama's *duta* means ambassador... jumping sea... going Lanka means Ceylone... Ravana house... big *bira* means soldier means fighter means killer.

The sahib : Call that monkey here. Call the director.

Badababu was in deep trouble. How to call him when he was on the stage ? If he called him, people would raise a hue and cry, which might offend the sahib. He was worried. Just then, that scene ended and Hanuman was about to leave the stage. The

sahib was impatient. He ordered badababu, "You call monkey. Monkey is going." To please the sahib, he left his seat and came back with Hanuman after sometime. With a smile on his face, the sahib told Hanuman, "Monkey. Good monkey. Very good monkey." He stretched his hand towards Hanuman who could not follow anything. Badababu got up and linked his hand with the sahib's.

The director of the opera party reached there, anxious to know what had happened. He was shaking in fear. The sahib was in a cheerful mood. He dug into his pocket and yanked out a ten-rupee note. He offered it to Hanu who hesitated to accept it. Badababu told him, "The sahibs give tips when they are pleased. Take it." Hanu took it with trembling hands. He bowed to the sahib and left.

Badababu introduced the director to the sahib. The sahib told him cheerfully, "Director ! You're a great director ! My country is so advanced, but I've not seen a director like you there." So saying, he rewarded him with a ten-rupee note which he accepted respectfully.

All this caused some disquiet among

the audience. They were delighted when they learnt the whole story. The play stopped as soon as the sahib left. All were full of praises for the sahib, convinced that he was a lover of art. But they praised badababu more for making their nondescript hamlet famous overnight.

One day badababu was absent from the office for sometime. The sahib was relaxing in the office when one of the junior employees entered his room. With folded hands, he told the sahib politely, "Sir ! Open air drama... in my *sahi*... come." The sahib gladly accepted his request. After sometime, he sent for badababu. Surprised at the untimely call, badababu hurried to the sahib, full of apprehensions : Did someone tell the sahib something against him ? Did he come to know that he was absent from the office ? When he entered the sahib's room, he was sprawling in an armchair. Seeing badababu, he shouted joyfully, "Tonight open air drama? Why didn't you call me ?"

Badababu knew that the opera was to be performed in the neighbouring hamlet, not in his own. The two hamlets were at loggerheads with each other. They had ten court cases against each other. The junior

clerk from that hamlet might have informed the sahib about it. Since the sahib had agreed to go, there was no way for him to prevent it.

Clearing his throat, he said, "The hamlet where the show will be held is not a good place. It will be better not to go there." With an air of disgust, the sahib said, "No, I must go." Badababu quickly replied, "I'll inform you after I make necessary arrangements."

Badababu realised that it was difficult for him to cope with the situation, to exercise his influence over the people who were his rivals. Suppressing his feelings, he called the junior clerk and had an elaborate discussion with him on the arrangements made. He urged him to see that the sahib was not put to any inconvenience.

Badababu reached the hamlet much before the sahib's arrival. The junior clerk had warned everyone to cooperate with badababu. He had told them clearly that it would be unwise to displease him; that might go against their own interests.

The sahib was punctual to a fault. He was given a warm welcome by the people of the hamlet. After refreshment, he was taken to the field to watch the play. As soon

as he was seated, the place resonated with the sound of music. The play went on, but the sahib looked unhappy. He whispered to badababu impatiently, "Where is monkey ? Ask the director to bring monkey." Badababu was puzzled. He was in a dilemma. Seeing him silent, the sahib scowled at him and commanded, "Bring monkey quickly."

Badababu : Sahib ! In this play, monkey not.

The sahib : Why not ?

Badababu : That night Sita kidnap. Hanuman search Sita. Tonight Draupadi undress. No Hanuman tonight.

The sahib : (threateningly) No, no. I'll see monkey. I've come only to see monkey. I must see monkey. No monkey, no opera. No job for that other fellow."

He was fuming with anger. The situation was serious. Badababu, accompanied by the junior clerk, rushed to the director who was not ready to accept their request. Badababu brought out something from his pocket and pushed it into the director's pocket. At last the director agreed. Heaving a sigh of relief, badababu returned to his seat.

After sometime, there was excitement among disquiet in the audience. The children were roaring with laughter. The sahib could hear the chattering of a monkey. His face lit up with a smile, he looked at badababu, as if to tell him that he had won a victory. Badababu nodded his head in agreement. But the spectators were annoyed as they knew that Hanuman had no role to play in the show. Presuming that the director had gone mad, many of them left the place in disgust.

Seeing Hanuman, the children clapped and cheered. The sahib was delighted. Badababu, to please the sahib, laughed too; he looked like a laughing mummy. The sahib offered Hanuman and the director ten rupees each. He shook hands with them and left, reminding the organisers to invite him once again when they would have an opera.

Once he left, everything became crystal clear. Everyone came to know that Hanuman was presented on the stage only to fulfil the sahib's wish. People resented : What did the sahib know about Hindu scriptures ? Why did they oblige him ? Wasn't it injustice?

The elderly people present there tried to pacify the angry crowd. They said, "Sometimes things like that happen. God had to touch the feet of a donkey in times of crisis. Are we greater that God ? Hanuman had to appear because it was necessary. You needn't worry about it. Now, all of you go home and don't discuss it anywhere."

A man from among the crowd was heard shouting, "O what an irony ! Hanuman has to appear in "Draupadi's Bastraharana" because the sahib wanted it!"

The Tale of The Old Demoness

Long long ago there was a featureless village in a remote countryside where people of various castes lived. Most of them depended on farming for their livelihood. Quite a few of them were small businessmen, selling goods at the local market. In the wee hours of the rainy evenings, there used to be a flood of ridgegourd flowers all over the village; on autumn mornings, the village road turned to a carpet of sweet-smelling night jasmines; during winter, the mild wind rippled the golden paddy crop and a swarm of bumble bees circled the flowers for honey in the sprawling mustard fields; in spring, the

pleasant smell of mango buds filled the air, and in summer, the plaintive notes of the cricket was heard, the rivers and canals dried up, making the village look like a widow's bare hands.

Towards the end of the village there was a hamlet inhabited by the people of the cowherd caste. It was there that Ganasha had spent his childhood with his parents. One morning he found his mother crying bitterly, banging her head. Before he could understand anything, the villagers gathered there, their heads hanging in sorrow. They carried his father away somewhere on a bamboo bed. Towards the evening, his mother seemed to be partly pacified.

Time went by. Ganasha learnt how to eat with his own hands, how to walk and how to count the cattle and the buffaloes by drawing lines on the ground or by using his fingers. His mother was satisfied with her son's progress. She thought, in a short time, Ganasha would be able to find work somewhere. Once employed, she would stop worrying about his sustenance. She knew a cowherd's job was not easy; rain or shine, he had to go out with the cattle to the distant fields. At present, they were passing through

hard times, having nothing to eat. She waited for the Dola festival, after which she would try to engage him in work somewhere.

She kept a count of days. Dussera had just gone, next would come Kumar Purnima to be followed by Abhisek Purnima, then... Oh ! She could not remember further. Anyway, Dola was not far away. During that festival many kinds of cakes would be prepared at every home. She used to do the same when Ganasha's father was alive. Where would she get money to buy the things required for it ? She hoped it would resume when Ganasha began to earn. She would make cakes and feed her son with her own hands. Peace and happiness would be restored, then.

After Aswina, came the month of Kartika. She did not have a single piece of grain at home, let alone paddy or rice. She went from door to door with the hope of borrowing some rice, but it was in vain. At that time there was no demand for labour. She was worried about how to feed her son. It became morning. She knew Ganasha would demand for food as soon as he woke up. She left home and walked along the village road until she reached a pond where

lotuses bloomed. She saw *kalama* creepers snaking away along the bank into a distance. Her eyes shone with sparks of hope. She went on collecting *kalama* leaves. She was afraid that someone might see her. She felt like someone saying, "O Ganasha's mother ! You've only one son. Aren't you able to feed him ? Will you give him boiled *kalama* to eat ? How long will you keep him alive with those leaves ? You should be ashamed of it. Why don't you die ?"

She cursed herself for failing in her duty as a mother. She regretted for her inability, but did not lose heart. "Let's manage with the leaves for the timebeing", she said to herself. She hoped she would be able to borrow some rice, and, not cooking all of it at a time, she would make it last for four times. Eating rice was necessary to make him strong. She returned home, the *kalama* leaves bundled in her clothes.

For many days she had no work. She could not collect rice from anywhere. The *kalama* creepers were shorn of leaves completely. Ganasha was unable to bear the pangs of hunger any longer. Going without food for days together, she suffered from stomach ailments and breathed her last.

Next morning the news of her death spread among the villagers who cremated her body and completed the funeral rites. From that day Ganasha was left alone in the world.

There was a rich man in the village. His wife took Ganasha under her wing. One day her husband said, "That *sala* consumes food, doing nothing. Let him look after the cattle from tomorrow." From the next day Ganasha took the cattle to the field to graze. He had no want of food any longer. He was sorry for his mother that she could not live to see how happy he was.

Days crawled by. Ganasha was now a boy of fifteen. In the meantime, he had mastered the tricks of the trade. In addition to the rich man's cattle, he took care of the cattle of the villagers. With the money he received from it, he repaired his old house and spent the night there.

During the Raja that year, there was festivity all over the village. Cakes were prepared in every house and Ganasha had plenty of them offered to him by the villagers. He ate to his heart's content and the surplus he preserved for the next morning. While taking the cattle to the field

he took a bellyful of it on the way. Only one *manda* cake was left. He pushed it through a crack on the soil and said, "If you're truly mine, you'll sprout by tomorrow morning. If you don't, I'll chop you with my uncle's axe."

Curious to see what had happened, he reached there the next morning. To his surprise, it had turned to a sprout. He told it, "If you are truly mine, you'll have leaves on you by tomorrow morning. Or else I'll chop you with my uncle's axe."

Next morning he found leaves on it. Everyday he would prescribe something to the plant and the plant would do as he said. Gradually it grew into a tree with flowers and *manda* cakes in place of fruits. People thronged the place to see the miracle, but none dared touch it, considering it an evil omen. They even stopped passing by it. Thus, with none to dispute, Ganasha became the sole owner of the tree.

One day Ganasha was sitting on the tree and eating cakes. The cows were left to graze in the field. Just then, an old woman came near the tree. Her body was bent with age; she was walking with the help of a stick. In a trembling voice, she said, "O dear ! O

my son ! I can't see nor hear. My hands are shaking and head reeling. I've been going without food for three days. Won't you give me a cake ?" Being poor himself, he could realise the suffering of a hungry woman. So he shook one of the branches from which many *manda* cakes fell to the ground. But the old woman said, "O dear ! O my son ! I don't see where the cakes are falling. Could you give a cake in my hands ? May God bless you."

Annoyed at her insistence to help her, Ganasha climbed down the tree. He picked four *manda* cakes from the ground and gave it in her hands. As he touched her hand, she showed her real form. In a moment she turned to a great demoness. She pounced on him and pushed him into a sack and tied its mouth tightly. Then she changed herself into an old woman as before. Carrying the sack on her head, she proceeded to her house.

On her way home, the old woman stowed the sack under a tree and went behind the screwpine plants to relieve herself. At the time two passers-by reached there to rest under the shade of the tree. Seeing them through the holes in the sack,

Ganasha called out to them for help. Hearing his cry, they unfastened the sack and saw a boy coming out of it. When he told them about the demoness, they fled in fear. He collected clods of earth and thorns and filled the sack with it. Then, he tied it as before and left the place.

After sometime the old woman returned from behind the screwpine plants and looked for water to wash herself. She went to a man ploughing in the field and asked him for water. That man advised her to go to the field with two ploughs. The plowmen there asked her to go to three ploughs, then four ploughs, then five. At last she got water in the field with seven ploughs and washed herself. When she came back to the tree, she was happy to see the sack as it was. She said to herself, "Poor fellow ! Lie inside the sack like that. You've no chance to escape. Today I'll feast on human flesh after a long time." Carrying the sack on her head, she proceeded to her house. While walking, the clods of earth hit her head. She thought the cowherd was hitting her head with his knees. She said, "Wait, you wicked! Let me first reach home. I'll thresh you, crush you into a pulp, cook

you in a big earthen pot and eat you from a young banana leaf."

At last she reached her home. From the door she shouted at her daughter who opened the door. The old woman went inside, put the sack on the floor and rested for a while. She whispered to her daughter, "There is a young boy inside the sack. Thresh him with the flail, crush him into a pulp and cook him in the big earthen pot. I am going to the blacksmith's to sharpen my teeth. I'll come back after bath. We'll eat him together."

Overjoyed by her mother's words, she took the sack and began to thresh it with the flail. She was surprised to find the boy silent and only dust rising out of the sack. Curiously she opened the sack and found only clods of earth and thorns inside it. In anger she sat down with a wry face. When her mother heard everything she felt angry and insulted. She vowed to teach the boy a lesson at an appropriate time.

Days passed. One day Ganasha was sitting on the tree and eating cakes. He was in a cheerful mood, singing in a low voice. Just then, an old woman appeared there. She told him softly, "O dear ! Who are you on

the tree ? Listen to this old woman. I'm one hundred years old. I can't see, nor can I hear. I've been unfed for three days. There is none in the world to depend on. Give me a cake. I'll bless you." Ganasha was sure that the wicked woman had come again. She would coax him first and kidnap him later. No, never would he repeat the mistake. He stayed seated on the tree silently. The old woman said in a trembling voice, "I've never come here before. People say the *manda* cakes of this tree are very tasty. And the boy who owns the tree is a nice guy. Had he been here, he would have surely kept my request. Isn't he here ? Some thief, perhaps, is stealing cakes from the tree."

The mention of the thief enraged Ganasha. He roared out, "O wicked demoness ! What a truthful creature you are! Don't I recognise you ? Hadn't you captured me once ? It was my good luck that I escaped. And today you've come pretending yourself innocent !" She quickly replied, "May the woman who did it have a disgraceful death ! May she die young ! Why should I do it, my son ? Am I able to do it ? Don't you see, how my hands and legs are shaking ! May the woman who caught you

once lose her clan ! May the devil eat her ! My son ! Give me a *manda* cake. I'm faint with hunger."

Ganasha had a soft corner for the poor. He thought she might not be the one he was referring to. Had she been the demoness, she would not have come for the second time for fear of being caught. She might not be the same woman. She must be very hungry. He shook one of the branches; *manda* cakes fell off it, some of them fell over her. The old woman was searching for them in vain. Her helplessness filled him with pity. He climbed down the tree and picking a *manda* cake, gave it in her hands. Suddenly she caught his hand and said, "You devil ! You troubled me very much last time. Now, who'll save you ?" Ganasha was stunned. He regretted to have fallen into her trap again. He was in a fix. Well, whatever was written in his fate must happen.

The old woman shut him in the sack. O God ! How strong she was ! She carried the sack on her head and hurried away. Unlike the other day, she did not stop anywhere, but went straight to her home. Reaching there, she told her daughter

smilingly, "This time I've caught the boy alive. Don't delay. Thresh him with a flail, crush him into a pulp and boil him in the big earthen pot. Let me go to the blacksmith's to sharpen my teeth. I'll have my bath and come back. We'll eat together. Be careful ! He may trick you."

Hearing her words, her daughter frowned and said accusingly, "I know you well. You said the same thing the other day. I can't waste my time unnecessarily." The old woman knew she did not believe her words. She took a stick and hit the sack with it. Ganasha cried out in pain. The girl was now sure that she would have a meal of human flesh that day. She decided to have a lot of fun with him before gouging out his throat and drinking his blood.

She shut the doors and opened the sack. A handsome young boy came out of it. He was healthy; she thought his flesh must be very soft. She decided to enjoy herself by ragging him. Just then, her eyes fell on the thick fuzz of long hair on his head. She thought of extracting from him the secret behind it. She asked him dearly, "O boy ! What's your name ?"

"Ganasha."

"How could your hair become so long and so beautiful ?"

Suddenly an idea dawned upon him. His face beamed with hope. He replied innocently, "My mother used to thresh it with a flail to make it longer." She was surprised. She could not understand how one's hair could be threshed. But she was not prepared to disbelieve him. Ganasha realised that his trick had worked. He quickly added, "The work is not so easy. My mother is the only one in the village who knew how to do it. She had learnt it from her mother. At first no one believed her, but when she did it successfully in one or two cases, they were surprised. Now there is a great rush in our house at noontime, everyone wanting to avail of the opportunity. She collects money from them. I'm the only one whom she taught the art. If you want, I can show you how to do it. You can also pass on the secret to others, if you so like."

The girl was impatient. On the one hand, her mother might reach anytime and demand for food, on the other, she would not let go the opportunity of having long hair. She told the boy, "I don't need to learn it. I only want you to go ahead making my

hair longer." Ganasha said, "Then, you've to wash your hair with turmeric water to make it soft." Both of them entered the kitchen. There were turmeric paste and chilly paste placed side by side. Ganasha mixed both of them together when she was not seeing. He mixed the paste with water and poured it on her head. When the water got into her eyes, they began to burn. "O my eyes are burning," she complained. Ganasha said, "It's a good sign. Shut your eyes. Let me pour some more water on your head before I thresh it."

Ganasha took her to the flail, and putting her head inside the pit, threshed it into pieces. Before she could cry out, she was already dead. He took off her clothes and dressed himself in it. He crushed her into a pulp and cooked her in the big earthen pot and waited for the demoness to come.

The demoness returned. She called out to his daughter and asked her if the meal was ready. Imitating her daughter's voice, Ganasha said, "Yes". He served her the meat curry on a banana leaf. When she began to eat it, her pet cat cried out, "Fie ! Fie ! She is eating her daughter's flesh !" Startled, she asked her daughter, "What's the cat

saying?" Ganasha came with a stick and beat the cat to death.

After meal, the demoness went to sleep. Lying on the bed, she told her daughter, "O dear ! Could you please oil my hair ?" Ganasha took some oil and sat on her bed, his back towards her. While applying oil to her hair, he said, "Mother ! You're already old. Who knows how long would you live ! What shall I do after you pass away ?" He pretended to weep.

Seeing her daughter in tears, the demoness was worried. To console her, she said, "Don't you worry. I'm leaving everything to you. You've a pot to cook rice and another for curry. I have hidden enough gold under the pot in which we cook *kanji*. That's enough to last your seven generations. Besides, my death is in my hands. The strand of white hair you see on my head is the secret of my life. If someone plucks it out, I'll die immediately. But who'll do it when no one knows about it ? If, at all, anyone dares to pluck it, I'll eat him alive. You're the only one to know it."

Delighted to hear this, Ganasha started combing her hair carefully. He located the white hair in the middle of her

head. Would he let go that opportunity ? No, never ! He pulled it off with all his might. The demoness, letting out a loud cry, fell dead then and there.

Without delay, Ganasha took a crowbar and entered the kitchen. He dug the earth under the rice pot, the curry pot and the *kanji* pot. He could not believe his eyes when he saw a huge quantity of gold stored there. He packed them into two sacks and brought them to his house.

From the next day he stopped working at others' houses. He built a house of his own and bought some land. He kept herds of cows and buffaloes at home and hired many men to look after them. The villagers were stunned to see all this. Where did Ganasha, the orphan, get all the wealth from ? Impressed by his status, a rich man of the neighbouring village married his daughter with him. Thus, Ganasha, the beggar, turned to Ganesh babu, a prosperous gentleman of the area.

Measurement

Ranka : Saintirish. (thirty-seven)
The sahib : What ? What ?
Uncle : Forty-eight.
The sahib noted down "Forty-eight."

Ranka : Batish. (thirty-two)
Uncle : Forty-two.
The sahib wrote "Forty-two."

Ranka : Ekchalis. (forty-one)
Uncle : Fifty-one.
The sahib wrote "Fifty-one."

It went on like this. Ranka would measure the length and breadth of a pit and call out a number, uncle would translate it into

English and the sahib would keep a record of it. Let me explain it elaborately.

It happened long ago, when I was an adolescent, reading in class nine. It was summer vacation and I was at home. One evening uncle came to our house. My mother was very happy to see him. He bowed to her and touched the feet of my grandmother in respect. My father was out for shopping. In those days the weekly *haat* was the lifeline of our area. My mother told him, " Wait for sometime, he'll be back soon. You've come here after a long time. Don't be in a hurry. Let me cook something for you. We've caught some fish from the pond today. Go back in the night after your meal."

He almost agreed with my mother. He only said, "It would have been better if I had returned early. You know our father; he must be moving outside the house impatiently, worrying about the delay." My mother asked, "Didn't you tell him you're coming here ?" "No," uncle replied, "I came to the construction site. I had no plan to come here. Tomorrow an officer would come to supervise the work. I've to make some arrangements for that."

Before he could finish, the sound of

my father's bicycle bell was heard from the rut behind our house. My mother announced, "Look, he is coming !" She went out of the house to receive him, uncle following her. She returned with a bag of vegetables father had brought. Father and uncle sat on the chairs laid in the backyard. After the exchange of pleasantries, my father asked him, "How is your work going on ?"

Uncle briefed, "Not bad. Tomorrow Murtibabu, the new S.D.O., is coming to take measurement. He is from Madras. It is his first posting in Odisha. He seems to be very honest and upright. I met him in the office only yesterday. He said he will visit the site tomorrow. As we don't have a section officer here, he will finalise the bill after recording the measurement of the pits. When I spoke of arranging lunch for him, he said, 'I'll carry my lunch with me.' I have never seen such a man ever in my life. I came to know that he does not understand Odia at all. I think, it will be better if we can arrange some green coconuts for him."

Father said, "Don't worry. I'll get them ready by tomorrow morning. All you've to do is to inform me when the officer arrives." Uncle replied, "I don't know if I'll

be able to do that. Please send someone to the river embankment to keep a watch."

The conversation continued on topics, such as the health condition of grandpa and grandma, the progress in farming etc. Mother interrupted, "Would you be talking like this or take your meals ? Do you know since how long Jai has come ? He has to return home in a dark night such as this !"

Father stood up, so did uncle. Washing their faces and feet, they entered the house. Mother served them with rice, dal, curry and fish broth. In the middle of their meals, she was saying, "Eat this, eat that. Why aren't you taking dal ? Isn't it salted ? Is the fish broth spicy ? I had used only two chillies. Let me get some rice, a little curry and a piece of fried fish for you." Suddenly she cried out, "O what a fool I am ! I have not given you the cakes I cooked with fish eggs !" With the speed of lightning she entered the kitchen and come back with the egg cake. Unheeded to the mild protests of father and uncle, she dropped it into their plates. Seeing father a bit annoyed, she said, "Well ! Eat that much only; I'm not going to give you more." After meal, she offered them

betel. Saying good bye, uncle took the path through the fields. Mother watched him walking down the rut until he was swallowed by darkness.

Waking up the next morning, I found a man chiselling green coconuts with a chopper and another man collecting them into a basket, I went away to clean my teeth. When I returned, father told me, "Finish your breakfast and hurry to the embankment with two clean glasses in a bag. Uncle will come there with a big officer. Do as he says." I got ready soon, and with the bag in my hands, I proceeded to the embankment. Sibadada, carrying a basketful of coconuts on his head, followed me.

The river embankment was very near to our house. Down it, was a long strip of land, from which the earth had been dug out to build the embankment. Then, a stretch of fertile land lay upto the edge of the water of river Baitarani, in which people grew paddy and vegetables during winter and summer. Grandma used to say that formerly our house was on the banks of the river. The men, women and the cattle of our family were continuously exposed to the fury of flood. The water was muddy. We used to

put some bamboo leaves into pots of muddy water to strain out the alluvial soil from it. That water was used for all purposes. During the rainy months, the bank was waterlogged. Most of the time, we fell ill. In the event of someone's death, it was not possible to cremate his body. After a long time the government built the embankment that made our lives more miserable. When there was no embankment, the excess water used to spread out in all directions; now it stood upto our nose. Then my great grandpa built a new house, where we had been staying till now. The coconut and the mango trees in our old place still existed as a mute witness to what my grandma had narrated.

The sun was blazing down from a clear blue sky. After waiting for sometime, I saw three men on bicycle coming in my direction. I thought one of them should be my uncle. In those days there were a few bicycles in our area, and only two in our village. So it was easy to recognise the riders. I was right; my uncle arrived after a while. He had with him a babu in a pair of trousers. He might be the "big officer" my father was talking about. There was another man too, in khaki half-pant and bottlegreen half-shirt.

He had also a pink handwoven towel on his shoulder. Since my childhood I had seen only policemen wearing khaki pant.

Bowing to all of them, I waited under a tree down the embankment. The man in half-pant brought out a red, round object from a pouch. The officer was ready with a note-book and pen in his hand. Uncle asked him, "May we start the measurement now ?" When he consented, uncle called out to the man in half-pant, "Ranka ! come, let's start from here." Ranka advanced towards the first pit with that red, round object in his hand. He unrolled a measuring tape out of it and asked my uncle to hold one of its ends. While measuring, Ranka said, "Saintirish". Failing to understand what he said, the officer asked, "What ? What ?" My uncle promptly translated it into English and replied, "Forty-eight." The officer noted it down in his note-book.

Ranka : Batish.

The officer : What ? What ?

Uncle : Forty-two.

Ranka measured another pit. He said, "Ekchalish." Uncle quipped, "Fifty-one."

Hearing this I giggled, which drew

my uncle's attention. He bawled at me, "Go away ! Why are you standing in the sun ?" Scared, I left the bag there and left for home. I overheard uncle saying to the officer in English that he scolded me as I was wasting my time, leaving my studies.

Returning home, I sat down with my books, though I was in no mood to read. I was trying to make out why uncle was so angry with me. Was it true that uncle did not know the English equivalent of thirty-seven, thirty-two and forty-one ? Or he deliberately made the mistake ? My adolescent mind was overpowered by a whirlpool of emotion, gradually developing into a state of panic. I felt a cyclonic tremor in me, being apprehensive about what uncle was going to tell my parents. After sometime, I fell asleep until my mother called out to me. "Wake up ! Uncle has come. He is dining with your father. Take your meal, and go to bed."

I was frightened to hear this. I heard father asking uncle, "Is the measurement done ?" Uncle replied, "Yes. The officer is a good man. He has assured me to settle the bills tomorrow. Where is Sura ? I've scolded him today."

"What for ? What did he do ?" asked father.

"It's nothing," uncle replied with a smile.

"There must be something. Why did you scold him ?"

Uncle explained, "This officer hails from Madras; he doesn't know our language. You know Ranka and his knowledge in English ! During measurement, whatever number he quoted, I added five or ten to it while translating it. It made Sura laugh. I was afraid; the officer might suspect me, he might check the measurement himself. In that case, I'll be held as a liar for all times. So I scolded Sura. After he left, the officer wanted to know why I was angry. I told him that he was wandering in the hot sun, leaving his studies."

When he finished, my father burst into laughter. My uncle, too, had a good laugh.

I was relieved to know the cause of his anger. But today, at this age, when I remember it, I feel like saying, "O Anna ! Can your fast be able to obliterate corruption from the minds of people ?"

A Pair of Earrings

Kanduri was banging her head and crying bitterly. She was turning over and over on the dirty road, from one end to another, in front of the Police Station. Most often she was wailing, at other times sobbing. Dressed in rags, she was covered with dust from tip to toe, looking like an idol made of dust. The morning mist had settled low, the tall trees in the compound dripping wet. Buried under thin covers and deeply asleep on the verandah, the homeguard was turning his side. One could hear the constable on sentry duty snoring deafeningly in the front room. A pair of mangy dogs, who had been using the verandah for years as night shelter, were the only ones to watch Kanduri's sad plight,

without a blink. As a show of sympathy, they raised their heads and began to bark. The noise disturbed the constable, who, with a mouthful of abuse, hurled a wooden ruler at them. The dogs knew it would happen; they jumped from the verandah and ran to the street. As the ruler, missing the target, fell off the verandah, a faint cry went up the place.

Startled, the constable got up and moved two steps forward to see what had happened. He found a woman, sitting down the verandah, was rubbing her right ankle vigorously. He was puzzled : Who was she ? How long had she been sitting there ? What did she want ? He came close to her and asked, "Who are you ? What are you doing here ?" Kanduri raised her head and looked at him. He asked her in surprise, "Hey, aren't you Kanduri ? What brought you here so early in the morning ?" Between sobs, she cried out, "Babu ! I've lost everything !" Confused, he asked her to tell him what she had lost. But she only wailed and wept. At last he told her, "If you don't let me know what has happened, what shall I tell badababu (the officer-in-charge) ?

She did not speak a word. In the

meantime the homeguard woke up and came to her. The constable asked him to keep a watch on her until he returned. He scurried off to badababu's quarters to inform him. He was mortally afraid of badababu. If he found someone crying in the Police Station, he would fly into a rage. His face would turn sour and he would say, "The Police Station is created to assuage the sorrows of the people. It is built with the money of the tax-payers. We are also paid our salaries by them. It is true we can't wipe tear from every eye, but we can at least console them. This is essential for every policeman. No one without a sense of compassion should join the police service." He instructed everyone, "Each and every matter should be reported to me immediately. Any delay will be severely dealt with."

The concerned constable had once delayed for half an hour in reporting a clash between two groups, for which he had to face serious consequence. He was pardoned only after a lot of persuation. Since that day he had never failed to inform badababu as soon as the matter came to his notice. Previously the officers-in-charge did not hear any petition unless they were paid bribe

either in cash or kind. Without bribe, they did not even allow anyone to meet them. But this badababu was different. He removed curtains from the doors and kept the door open for each and every citizen. He allowed the under-privileged mass to sit in front of him in his office, which, as others alleged, made them unafraid of the police. They even stopped providing their hospitality, which they had been doing traditionally, when the police party went to their villages for investigation. Another quality that made him different from others was that he never underestimated anyone. He would consult the young and the old alike before taking a decision.

He remembered how once a puja was being held in badababu's quarters in honour of Lord Akhandalamani. Cannabis was one of the chief offerings in the puja. Badababu called out to him loudly, "O Panda ! Are you going somewhere ? Get me cannabis of four annas when you return." Saying so, he went away with his friend, a teacher in a local college, for a walk. Panda was curious; he went back to the quarters to know the truth. When Ma said that cannabis was needed for the puja, he heaved a sigh

of relief. He was suspecting badababu unnecessarily, though he knew he did not take even a paan. The fact that he chose him to get cannabis proved that badababu had taken him into confidence. It encouraged him to resolve that he would obey him most faithfully.

When he rang the bell at badababu's quarters, Ma opened the door and came out, wiping her eyes. Seeing him, she asked, "What is the matter, Pandababu ? Why do you want badababu so early in the morning? Is anything wrong ?"

Pandababu replied calmly, "No, Ma! There's nothing wrong. Since badababu has joined, unlawful activities have come to a stop. Our babu is not like others." "Then why do you call him ?" Ma asked. Pandababu explained, "Kanduri has been crying her eyes out since early morning. I asked her many times what was wrong, but she did not speak a word. It's badababu's standing instruction that he must be informed about anything happening in the Police Station without delay. So I thought it my duty to inform him."

"Well ! I appreciate your dutifulness, but, instead of awaking badababu, you

disturbed me", Ma said. Pandababu was frightened; he began to sweat. But, with a smile, she said, "Do you mind my words ? I was joking. You're right. You ought to bring it to badababu's notice. What happened to Kanduri ? Doesn't she say anything ?" Collecting himself; Pandababu said, "No, she doesn't. She is only crying. You know badababu well. We are ordered not to let anyone cry or wait at the Police Station. Kanduri used to sell curd; she first comes to you, she extracts ghee from butter in your presence before she gives it to you. Since she is known to you, I came here." Isn't badababu awake ?

"He was on duty the whole night; he only returned at four a.m. That's why I was not calling him. I think, the matter is serious, otherwise you would not have come. Let me go and wake him up. You may go now," she said.

In a short time badababu reached the Police Station. Seeing him, Kanduri's suppressed grief melted into tears that slashed down from her eyes. Holding back her tears, she said that last night there was a theft in her house. Someone had stolen a pair of golden earrings weighing two annas.

She had put all her savings in buying it for her granddaughter's marriage.

Kanduri's woeful words washed away whatever little sleep was left in his eyes. He got ready to leave for her village immediately.

For a poor woman, such as she was, a pair of earrings weighing two annas was worth the wealth of seven kings. He left for her village to look into the matter and try to retrieve what she had lost.

By the time he reached there, the sun had dispelled the cold touch of the winter morning completely from the air.

The stories in this book are selected from various collections of stories by the author, published between 1981 and 2018. The stories and their sources are as follows :

From **Khordha Lungi Pindha Samrat:**
The Lungi-clad Emperor, Rain Everywhere, Wax and Wane

From **Kasturi Mruga Ebam Anyanya Galpa:**
The Hollow Man, The Election, Srikanta Sir, Not to Worry

From **Gadha Upakhyana:**
The Tale of a Donkey, The Sahib and The Monkey, The Tale of an Old Demoness

From **Khandita Janhnara luha:**
Measurement, A Pair of Earrings



Basant Kumar Tripathy is an academician, poet and translator. He has co-translated Phakirmohan's Atmacharita, Lachhama, and Prayaschitta into English. His other works of translation include Tika Gobindachandra (2015), Mathuramangala (2016) and Huma-Bimaleswar (2017). He has also published two books of poems in Odia.

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Written over a period of four decades, these stories are chilling portrayals of those who suffer from social inequality and injustice that leave their lives incomplete. A lyricist of ordinary life and ordinary people, the writer exposes the warped materialism that turns decent people into twisted caricatures. Each of the stories is a shining example of accurately observed social commentary. The writer is clearly a master observer: no details evaded, from the trapping of his protagonists' world to their hopes and dreams. The stories are deeply serious, yet at the same time, brilliantly funny. Imbibed with enormous richness and art, each of them is a revolving door of delicious characters.



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